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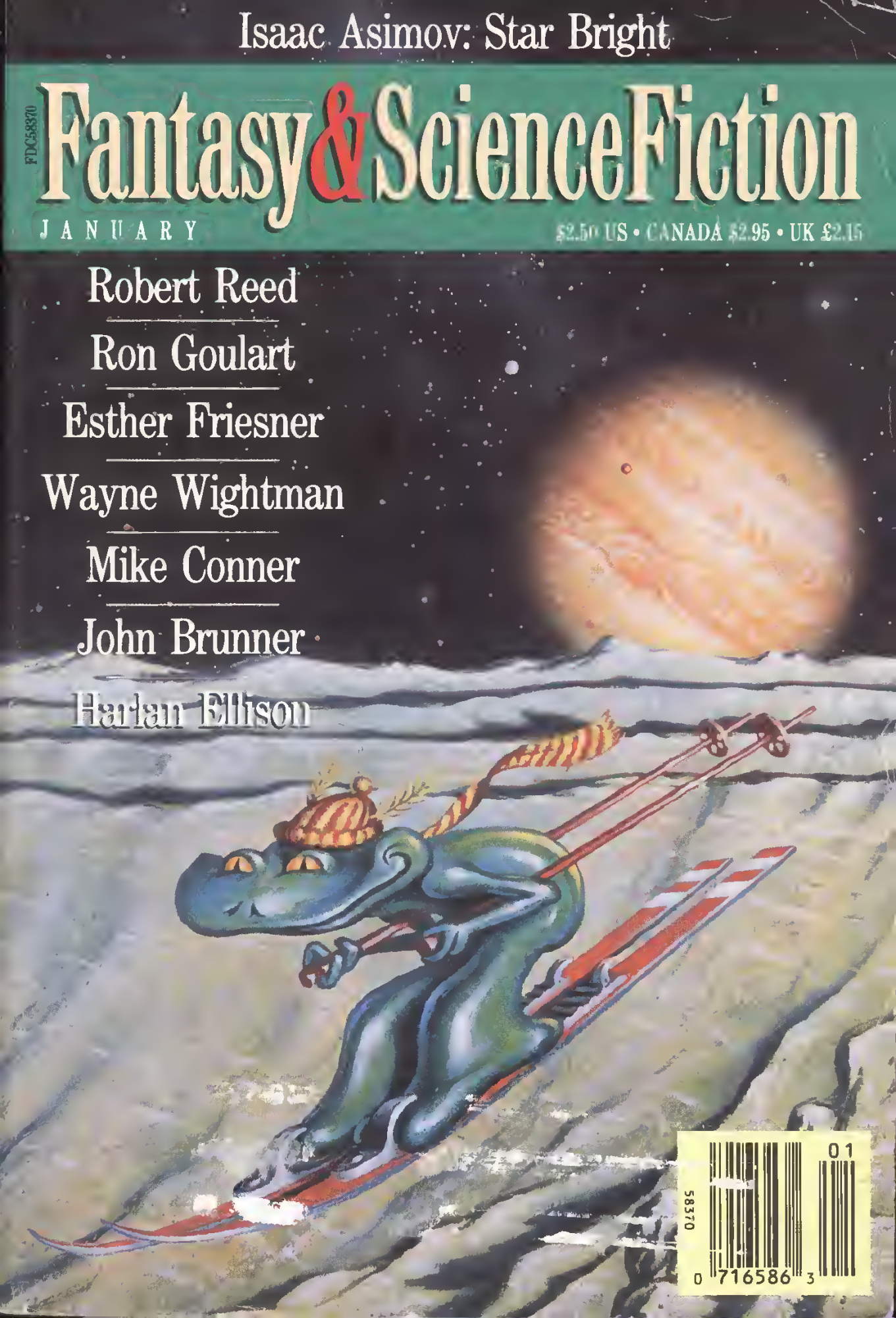
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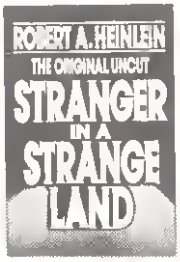
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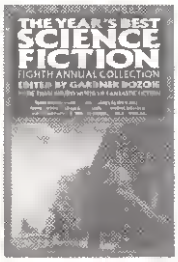
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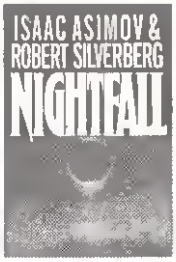
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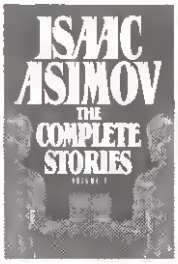
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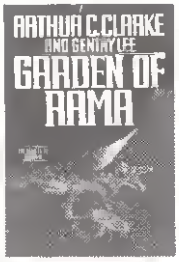
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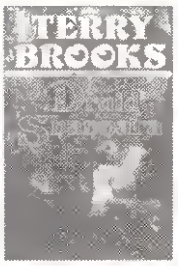
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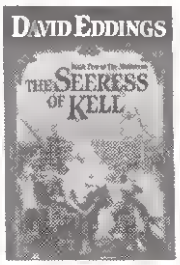
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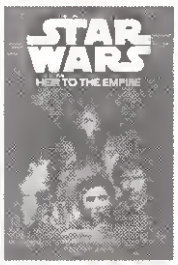
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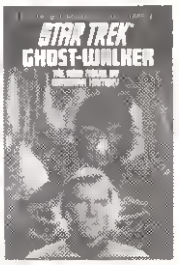
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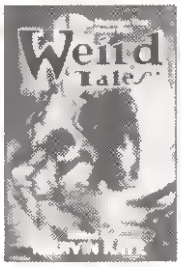
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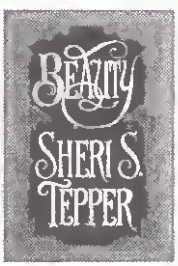
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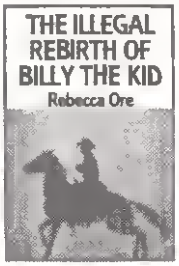
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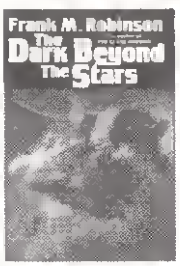
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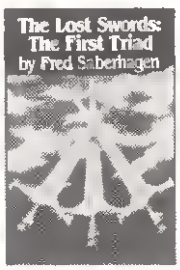
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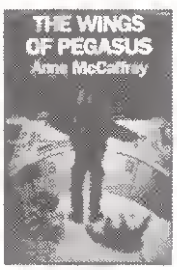
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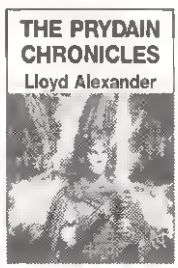
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"Son, it's time. *Witch* do you want for joining now?"



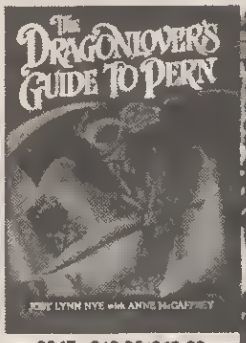
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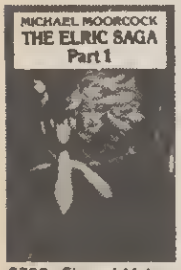
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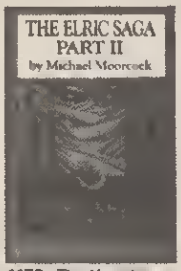
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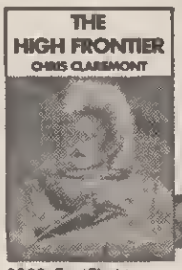
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JANUARY • 43rd Year of Publication

NOVELETS

AFTER ALL	10	**Robert Reed**
THE MYSTERY SPOT	126	**Mike Conner**

SHORT STORIES

THE MAN WHO LOST THE GAME OF LIFE	30	**John Brunner**
SUCH A DEAL	55	**Esther M. Friesner**
HERSHEY'S KISSES	82	**Ron Goulart**
THE CRETACEOUS WALTZ	101	**Wayne Wightman**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	45	**Algis Budrys**
BOOKS TO LOOK FOR	51	**Orson Scott Card**
HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING	73	**Harlan Ellison**
SCIENCE: Star Bright	116	**Isaac Asimov**

CARTOONS: HENRY MARTIN (54), JOSEPH FARRIS (115), FRANK HAUSER (125), S. HARRIS (163)
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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

AS I write this, the day after Gorbachev resigned from the communist party, the world is still reeling from the events of the past few days. Assumptions of a lifetime have overturned in a matter of hours.

When you read this, some other world event will probably have overtaken the headlines. The changes in the Soviet Union will be old news — not quite old enough to be considered history. Our interpretation of the events might be different because new information or new problems have cast a different light on the proceedings.

Even so, one image will remain: Boris Yeltsin, standing on top of a tank, his silver-white hair ruffled, his suit proper, arms raised as he speaks, risking his life to save a man who had once tried to destroy him, all to save a country that he loves.

At that moment, Boris Yeltsin was a hero. The world understood his act as one of courage: one man, in desperation and panic, facing down an entire system — and being the sole barrier against a bloody internal civil war.

History will judge whether Yeltsin's motives were truly selfless. And it may sift through the evidence to discredit his heroism. But that will not prevent those of us who lived through the moment from remembering it for what we thought it was: Courage, of the type most often found in books.

Most of us don't recognize courage when we see it, for it happens in the small, in the everyday. Sometimes that courage gets rewarded — my hometown named a street after a nineteen-year-old boy who jumped into the icy water of Lake Superior to save a child — but most often it gets reviled or worse, ignored.

In July, I went to a hard rock concert with a friend of mine. The audience was mostly young, dressed in leather with studs, wearing tattoos, dyed hair, and too much jewelry. A few of us wore blue jeans and cotton shirts, being of a slightly older generation, one that was in high school when the group got

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started. We were clearly out of place.

Whether we wore jeans or leather and chains, we were not the audience for the young singer who comprised the opening act. His name is Vinnie James, and I recommend that you go out and buy his first recording off of RCA. He wandered on stage, wearing ripped jeans and a torn t-shirt, carrying only a guitar. When he sat down, most of the audience ignored him and continued their conversations. We were expecting a lot of loud, assaultive music, music in which the lyrics were secondary to the beat, in which the performance was as important as the sound.

He played his guitar solo, sang songs in which the lyrics carried his message. Political songs which he wrote himself, songs that owed more to a late sixties rock tradition than a late seventies hard rock one. He asked the audience to sing with him on the second song, and most just stared at him. The hostility was almost audible. But he finished his set, and by the time he was done, the amphitheater was quiet. And when he got up to leave, the audience called him back.

He showed courage and what I considered to be a quiet kind of heroism. For he played before a hostile audience and turned them into one that may not have accepted him, but at least respected him. One that ultimately listened to him. And maybe, for a brief moment, heard what he was trying to say.

Courage. Heroism. Antiquated words that some people claim have no meaning in our current society. Yet they've been reverberating through my head for over a week now, linking these two incidents with several others — some I've witnessed personally, and some I've watched through that golden medium of instant communication, television.

And each time, I accepted those acts for what they seemed to be: acts made by people who are more than human, people who have tapped into a sense of spirit, a sense of truth greater than that under which the rest of us live, and I refused to look beyond those assumptions.

Yet I was wrong.

For the truth hides on our bookshelf, in the films we watch, in the stories we read. I have often thought it fascinating that we make stars out of people who stand before cameras and pretend they are living an ordinary life: Kevin Costner as a forgotten soldier in *Dances with Wolves* or a half-crazy Iowa farmer in *Field of Dreams*; Susan Sarandon playing a dissatisfied waitress in not one, but two recent movies: *White Palace* and *Thelma and Louise*. Most of our literature is

(to page 44)

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Robert Reed returns to these pages with a stunning science fiction story about love and life after death. Since his first publication in Writers of the Future, *Robert has gone on to sell a number of short stories and some wonderful novels. Bantam Spectra just reprinted* Black Milk, *and have also published Robert's newest novel,* Down the Bright Way.

After All

By Robert Reed

IT WAS THE worst possible timing.

Laura was under Clay with her eyes closed and then open, all at once open, and she seemed to stiffen an instant before asking, "Do you hear it?" with a quiet, rushed voice. Hear what? Both her hands came around him and pushed at his warm, naturally scented plastic chest, and Clay pulled back and lifted himself up onto his toes and hands. He was suspended over her, and she said, "Listen," without any sound. He watched her mouth moving in the dim light, then after a moment she was shaking her head. "Did you hear anything?"

"Like what?"

"Like someone on the stairs?"

He closed his eyes and slipped into the nearest wall. Tiny cameras and

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microphones were scattered throughout the house, and it took him moments to make a reasonable search. "I can't find anyone," he admitted when he returned. "Did you —?"

"Shhh!"

Clay shook his head, imitating a deep breath.

His wife sensed his irritation. She began pulling out from beneath him, and he asked, "Just what did you hear?"

"Someone on the stairs." She spoke with precision and a certain tension. "They were creaking—"

"The stairs?"

"*I heard footsteps!*" She was whispering with a shout's intensity. "*I did!*" She started climbing from the bed, and Clay watched her face while listening with his body's ears. Perhaps he should search the entire house — all three floors and the spaces between — but then he heard the steady rasping of a fat black cricket. It was just outside the bedroom window. She might have heard the cricket, he reasoned. And he, on the other hand, hadn't noticed it for obvious reasons. Irritation became a modest anger, and perhaps it showed on his face —

"You don't believe me!" she snapped.

"Something creaked. . . . Fine. . . !"

"Just never mind," said Laura. She turned and walked to the bathroom, and Clay made his body sit upright against the headboard, legs straightened and his idle hands touching himself. His erection was fading, the false blood draining into its heated cavity and a few bright drops of false semen making the head of the penis glisten. He wiped himself dry, hesitated for a moment, and then placed a finger on his tongue, tasting spearmint. Then he retreated back into the wall and migrated into the bathroom, on the sly.

The house cameras were intended for Clay's convenience and to save wear on his elaborate body. He felt as if he were standing behind his handsome wife, admiring her without being seen. Laura was twice a grandmother, but incapable of aging, it seemed. Her gray hair was striking and her muscled legs would suit a young woman. Free-radical flushes and exercise had done their best, and Clay loved those fine long legs. He loved to start his eyes at the ankles and allow them to rise, absorbing the calves and knees and the perfect thighs, then that sweet point of unison which still, after everything, made what passed for his breath stop short for an

instant.

She guessed what he was doing, looking into the mirror and saying, "You don't believe me," with her eyes fixed on the camera. "You don't," she repeated, her voice calm and flat. It was a statement of fact, nothing angry or malicious.

"You must have heard something," Clay replied through the intercom.

"Thank you."

He thought of the cricket but said nothing.

She was standing at the sink with her damp body leaning forward, hands upon the marble and her eyes finding her own eyes now. After a moment she said, "Come in here." She had never liked speaking through the intercom, even when he was alive. "Clay? Just come in here."

He migrated into his body, stood, and walked to the bathroom. He tried to make his gait natural, and he scratched his crotch as if it itched, asking, "Is this better?"

She said, "Hold me."

He put both arms around her, his penis hanging between her firm cheeks and his hands cupping her breasts, and she almost snuggled against him. She tried and nearly felt at ease, and Clay watched both of them in the mirror. They were a handsome couple. When they were in school, all their friends had joked that Laura wasn't the pretty one, it was Clay, and for years his features had weathered well. Then last year the doctors had found the novel cancer, and the cancer had sucked him dry with an ungracious steadiness, finally killing his meat-and-bone body. He had looked a hundred years old at the end. Thank goodness they had had the foresight to make holo-molds of his body and face, the illness in its earliest stages. Thank the platoon of experts and a chunk of their own savings that there were steps that could be taken, preparations that could be managed. His final bed had been in the basement, in the old billiard room, and he had been surrounded by machinery and the state-of-the-art computer marvels; and when that body of wasted flesh failed, on schedule, the same experts put the finishing touches on something that might be the reborn Clay, alive and whole and living inside that tireless and intricate hardware.

Clay looked at them as he would look at a portrait.

Laura dipped her head and nearly spoke. Her mouth opened and then closed again, then she found the energy, telling him, "I'm sorry, love. I just

wasn't. . . . I don't know. . . . I thought someone was out there. . . ."

"And I didn't hear it," he responded. He tried to sound understanding, saying, "I just missed it; that's all."

"Not if I imagined it."

He said, "Maybe the stairs just creaked."

"It doesn't matter," she replied. "I'm sorry."

It took him a moment to realize her apology had changed direction. She was sorry for her inattentiveness during intimacy.

"It's all right," he promised.

"Let's go back to bed."

It was a feigned enthusiasm, but not entirely forced.

Laura said, "O.K.?" and touched him in a place, in a way, that nobody else had duplicated. Her hand was on the small of his back, pressing at him while the fingers moved —

— and he said, "Fine," while straightening his back.

"Good."

But it was Clay who moved first. He dropped his lifelike arms and stepped away, and Laura stayed in front of the mirror for another moment. She was smiling and watching herself smile with a certain intensity, as if trying to see if she were doing it in the proper way.

Sometimes it had seemed that they weren't the happy couple everyone took them to be, that they were merely comfortable together and more than a little dependent on one another; and when the cancer was found — a new and incurable strain brought on by a world of persistent chemicals and too little ozone — it wasn't any sense of happiness that kept them together. At least that's the way Clay felt. It was their shared dependency and Laura not wanting to face the approaching upheavals, and it was Laura who brought up the possibility of fooling death. Computers and their cousins, the cyborgs, were doing wonders. Weren't they? She and Clay weren't the wealthiest people, but they had resources. Why work hard for two lifetimes and save money just to end with a fancy coffin under a rectangle of manicured green ground? Why not cling to life, or at least something approximating life? And yes, Clay had had similar thoughts. Secret daydreams. But they had made him feel selfish and maybe a touch foolish up until the instant Laura was saying, "Listen," while they lay in the dark. "Dear? I've been thinking, and what would you say about going to

someone who knows something about cybernetics . . . and maybe just exploring the possibility . . . ?"

At first he had felt an enormous relief. This was before the pain that would cut through every drug and the failure of his natural organs; this was before his own death was anything but a terrible abstract concept with the power to make him sleep badly and suffer from nightmares. He felt joyful just to have the prospect of any hope. Even something as contrieved as having his brain examined cell by cell, synapse by synapse, and recorded into a digital database . . . even that seemed to be a godsend. "Let's try," he told Laura. "I want to try something." She was crying, clinging to him, and he promised, "I'm not giving up. *We're* not giving up," with an angry voice scarcely louder than a whisper.

The doctors weren't pleased with their decision. They were people with egos and professional standards, and they didn't appreciate patients making what they regarded to be elaborate funeral preparations instead of focusing on their treatment and eventual recovery. They considered Clay to be a tough case, a challenge, but there were always new treatments and fresh combinations of the old treatments, and what was the good in wasting effort on someone already convinced of his death?

And the cybernetic experts — the ones who would earn the bulk of the money and honor — voiced their own reservations. Their technologies were extraordinarily new and far from reliable. Minuscule probes would have to be injected into the bloodstream and do the actual collection of data, and having several tens of millions of amoeba-sized devices roaming among the neurons was never entirely safe. Plus, they warned, they weren't offering anyone immortality. They were simply building an enormously accurate portrait of those things within Clay's mind — memories and tendencies and the cluttered expressions of his genes — and with luck they would complete the portrait in time, storing everything within the finest commercial mainframe computer, then fitting this mass of data with the suitable overlording programs . . . and no, they confessed, it wouldn't be Clay himself who would live inside the crystal chips inside the ceramic box in their basement. That was important to understand. It would be a splendid and sophisticated image of Clay. The image would feel and act much like him, yet it would find its odd existence wholly natural. The overlording programs would see to it. And in the meantime their entire house would be rebuilt. Its internal wiring would be enlarged

and improved a thousandfold, then his facsimile soul would be free to wander. The cameras and microphones would serve as windows, and of course Clay could interface with any television channel or immerse himself in any music, recorded or live —

"But what about a body?" Laura interrupted with a combination of alarm and fury. "I've read where you can build —"

An amazing body, yes. The experts nodded in unison, then explained how it was possible to fabricate an artificial form that would mimic her husband in almost every category. ("Categories?" thought Clay. "I'm a mess of categories.") He would smell natural, for an example. And his tongue would be warm and wet. And of course his entirely natural genitals would be capable of normal sexual pleasure . . . and then, in the next breath, they were mentioning the limitations inherent in this new life. Until some golden future age, perhaps fifty or a hundred years from today, when the entire planet would be wired in a suitable fashion to allow Clay to travel. For now, alas, he would have to live every moment within the rebuilt walls. There were technical limits and demands beyond their money. Was that clear? Ma'am? And the body itself would be difficult to maintain if used too much or in dangerous ways. Sir? Was that understood? These experts, mused Clay, were earnest and clumsy in the pattern of all pioneers. One of them said, "Your home, which is very nice and roomy and fine, is going to be the only place you can be," and another mouthed the single word, "Prison," when he thought no one noticed, and then a third sang out, "But with a beautiful green lawn on all sides and a wallscreen connected to your telephone lines, the whole world will be in reach. That should make things more than bearable. Do you agree?"

They made their final decision two minutes later, and within án hour they had signed a variety of contracts and disclaimers so that the first minuscule robots could be injected into Clay's blue veins. And the medical doctors continued their work as well. Perhaps the two professions were competing with one another, honor and pride at stake. For a little while it seemed as if the doctors were winning. Clay's health worsened, but not as swiftly as predicted, and there were even days when his pains lessened and his strength seemed to be on the rebound, and Laura would hold the thin, pale hands, trying to say comforting words whenever he was lucid. But what if he survived? she wondered. What would she do then? She imagined one Clay recovering and rising from his deathbed, and meanwhile

the other Clay was nearly completed, bright young geniuses putting the final touches to their composition of digitized laser light . . . and what would Laura do with two of them? What then?

She didn't have to face the nightmare. Her husband died in his sleep, suddenly and with almost no warning, and Laura had the body removed and cremated, and then brought the ashes home again in the cheapest urn. There was no funeral. Under the circumstances a funeral would have been a lie, or worse. Laura simply called the immediate family and their best friends, explaining what had transpired while trying to put the best face possible on everything. Everyone had seemed supportive months before; now they were quiet and thoughtful, nodding while not quite looking at Laura through the big wallscreen. Afterwards she walked outside and scattered the ashes and gray-white bits of bone across some of their flower beds, trying to make the event seem matter-of-fact. Then she returned to the house, crying softly and holding her arms crossed on her chest. She muttered the Lord's Prayer several times, surprised that she knew every word; and one of the cybernetics experts met her at the door, informing her that the new body was en route from the factory, and everything else was in place. It wouldn't be long now, and, of course, she had his condolences.

Yet she made the experts wait several days while she fidgeted. Was this right? Smart? Moral? She thought of calling her daughters and asking for their advice . . . but this wasn't their decision or their burden, and she didn't call. There were moments when Laura wondered if it would be best to erase Clay's sleeping self. Certain buttons pressed in a certain sequence would blank the computer of every data point; the experts had shown her how to do it in the enormous field manual, making certain that it wouldn't be done by accident. This was their hard work, after all. It wouldn't be murder, at least so far as the state was concerned — Clay was legally dead and beyond all harm and malice. Laura could look at the buttons and make her dark considerations for a little while; it was her right. Then she stepped away and breathed deeply, calling to the team leader with a sharp, strong voice:

"I'm ready! Please . . . can we do this now, please?!"

They carried the plastic body upstairs to the master bedroom, Laura not wanting Clay to have to climb stairs too soon after waking. What if he fell and cracked an expensive limb or two? The body was naked except for

a small swimsuit, and it was man-heavy and rigid and somewhat unwieldy. She made them put it on the bed, telling everyone, "Thank you," before ushering them out the door. "Will you wake him for me, please? on your way out of the house, please? Thank you. Thanks." Then she shut the door and turned the latch and undressed. Several times she and Clay had talked about this moment. He had wanted to make love before anything else, if that was all right. She pulled off the swimsuit — this was her husband, she was thinking with a certain precision — and she touched the penis out of curiosity, finding it cold and flaccid. Then he moved. His arms and shoulders jerked, then the lifelike pretty face became alert. The plastic flesh was warming and softening, and the mouth opened, Clay's own voice saying, "God, look at you," with a casual leer that made Laura halfway angry. It was as if she had come to wake him from an afternoon nap, and he hadn't seen her for half an hour, no longer, smiling at her and then reaching. He was a duplicate of her dead husband — no, this was Clay! —and she forced her feelings out of reach and smiled, telling him, "You look good . . . I think" and then she heard the experts downstairs. They were leaving by the front door, laughing among themselves and not realizing how the sound carried; and Laura stood very still, feeling cold, wishing for a little more professionalism all the way around. Please.

A WEEK PASSED after Laura had heard someone on the staircase, and Clay nearly forgot about their mysterious intruder. He went about his life in the usual ways, following routines that had gathered around him in these last months. He ate because it felt natural and always pleasurable, and his body pissed away the untreated water and shit the masticated eggs and meat and potato chips into the sewer system. He had three meals daily, plus endless snacks, and on the weekdays, Laura was gone from late morning to late afternoon. He had the house to himself. She was still working half-time hours in the large office she had once managed — it was something to do, she claimed, and the bosses still appreciated her experience — and sometimes Laura would shop or meet their old friends for lunch or dinner. Clay himself had time to read the books he had always wanted to read, and he would watch television by plugging his consciousness straight into the wallscreen. Television was like a dream then, everything oversized and spectacular. "Someday," he told Laura, "everybody will watch it this way." He studied the game shows

and soap operas, but mostly he watched the odd sporting events delegated to daytime entertainment. He like best the lunar football league with its strangely built athletes — tall men and women with noticeable fat — leaping high and kicking oblong balls across a rubberized terrain. He learned the names and histories of every team, and sometimes he found himself shouting along with the tiny crowds — everything filled with a strange and potent featherweight vigor.

Then one night he woke . . . no, it was in the morning. He woke in the basement because his consciousness retreated to the basement whenever he slept; it was a condition of his programming, thus it felt completely natural. Why was he awake? He didn't know. Had something wakened him? Perhaps a microphone had heard something, or perhaps it was just a dream. Yet he found himself listening to the crickets outside and the little sad creaks of boards and nails, and he couldn't relax. Something had him on edge. Finally he migrated upstairs and into his body, and he climbed out of bed without being too obvious, reasoning that if there was an intruder, it would be more intimidated by a figure of substance than a set of impulses running light-quick through the walls.

Laura was asleep, or she was pretending.

Clay stood motionless for a long while, listening to the normal sounds. Then he felt an urge to check the kitchen. Why the kitchen? Instinct was talking to him, it seemed. He left the house lights off and felt the chill of the air, walking quietly, going downstairs and pausing before the kitchen's swinging door, when he heard something . . . something . . . it was almost nothing, as sounds went. A running mouse would be louder and more distinct, he decided; and he took a step and pushed at the hand-worn spot on the door's brass plate and paused and waited, seeing nobody, wishing now that he had used the kitchen camera, because whatever it was had already escaped. Nobody was there. He took several more steps forward and then paused, feet apart, and he locked his joints and did nothing, losing track of time. He had been refreshed by his sleep; he was alert and silent, shutting his body down to a minimum of activity. No false breathing; no little twitches. *It's a mouse,* he started telling himself, and if he was very, very patient —

— there was a motion. No sound, he realized, but something was here with him. Clay saw it in the corner of an eye, but when he turned his head, it seemed to vanish from view. It had melted away, and he hadn't seen

enough to guess its shape or colors or even estimate the distance between his flawless eye and it.

Something else was here with him, and he took a tentative step. The artificial body, constructed to mirror every human talent and liability, sensed a sudden raw cold engulfing it. It felt as if the furnace couldn't reach into this one pocket of stale air, and for a panicky instant, Clay considered retreating out of the body, leaving it entirely. He felt a force pressing at him from all sides, and the cold worsened, and the sensation lasted for a few intense seconds. Clay started to sweat yesterday's drinking water, and he gasped out of habit; and then the cold subsided for no reason, and his fear became more of a ragged curiosity. What had happened? He sat down on one of the hard kitchen chairs, trying to make no noise. He was breathing nervously and waiting, but nothing showed itself, and after a while the sun was up, and someone came up behind him — it was Laura — and she said, "Dear?" to the walls as much as to his upright body. "Clay?"

He turned his head, saying, "Here."

"When did you get up, dear?"

"Not long ago," he lied.

"I didn't hear you. You couldn't sleep?"

"I guess not," he allowed. He looked at her legs moving beneath the sheer bathrobe, and he let his body breathe in a steady fashion. Then she was talking to him. She was pulling a cup from the cupboard, reaching high with the bathrobe snug against her rump, and she said something about leaving early today because she had errands to do, if that was all right, and Clay rose and went to the kitchen window, looking outside at the lawn and flowers, counting colors until he had found all of them.

One time, only once, did Laura ask about *the end.* Did he remember anything at all? And Clay had done his best to explain what he could remember. He was sick and miserable, yes, but his death? No. As far as he was concerned he had taken a long nap and come awake completely healed, at the peak of good heath, and he was sorry. "Why are you sorry?" she asked, her voice tense and quick. Why am I sorry? he wondered. He had to stop and think hard for a moment. "I shouldn't have brought it up," she was saying. It was as if they had made some pact, certain things beyond discussion, and she had broken the pact. And he was sorry, he thought, because she had hoped for a thread connecting his former self

and his present self. She wanted him to talk about floating above his ruined body and entering the ceramic housing at the instant of death, his soul preserved; but that wasn't what had happened, and now it was too late to even lie. He should have lied. He should have been ready with a perfect fable, and he wasn't, and now she turned away, and there wouldn't be another chance again.

In these last months, they had never fought. They didn't even argue over tiny things anymore.

At first the quiet had worn well. Clay was alive, after all. He had cheated the ultimate threat and now thrived inside his comfortable house, and everything about life and living seemed lovely. The sex was wonderful, at least for him. He felt closest to natural when he and his wife did the reliable things with a renewed vigor, when he could lose himself in the action; and it wasn't until later, after weeks of teenage-style rutting, that Clay realized Laura was feeling self-conscious and perhaps had been self-conscious from the beginning. It wasn't like her to keep her feelings secret, and maybe it was just him. His imagination was inventing nonsense. But there was a moment, in the midst of intercourse, when it was as if he were inside her skull and hearing her thoughts, and Laura was thinking how he was nothing but an intricate plastic device only several thousand times more expensive than a top-of-the-line dildo.

From that point on, now and again, little things betrayed her mind.

There was the way she never spoke during intercourse, holding herself to moans and whimpers of varying intensity. Then there were the afterglow moments when she wouldn't ask him to move a hand or leg pressing at her from a bad angle, but instead she'd grip the offending object herself and move it aside. She might have been adjusting the sheets or a crooked picture frame. And Clay kept noticing her almost glacial fear of fights. She fled all confrontations. What had been joy at first dissolved into a tension that made Laura silent when she should have snapped, tight-lipped when she normally would have wept, and merely distant when Clay did or said something, or likewise failed to do or say something, that once would have caused an outburst or a full scale argument.

Clay understood some of what she was thinking because he had the same muting fears. What if they were caught up in their fight? What if passions made them say things that couldn't be forgotten? A little spat evolves into a firestorm, and then what? How could people in their circumstances deal

with that kind of trouble? That's why everything angry was swallowed. By April they found themselves in something wholly unlike the marriage that had lasted thirty years, new rules in place and the new taboos absolute; and they couldn't so much as mention the transformation, fearing that would be enough to make everything tumble out of control.

Early on, Clay had granted Laura her freedoms. She had her job and good friends who never had enough time to visit them at home, and she had the sweet freedom of motion. He didn't dare ask her to remain with him every day; he was always cheerfully seeing her to the door and greeting her when she arrived home again, asking about her travels; he had to feel grateful for any companionship, as well as anything that passed for love.

A few of Clay's oldest friends did visit, once or maybe twice. They were obviously uncomfortable in his presence. And for a while he made weekly calls to his daughters, him sitting in his favorite chair while watching them on the wallscreen, watching their eyes wander and their voices fade, and him feeling more and more like a plastic facsimile. Would the daughters come to visit? Would they bring his grandchildren? "We'll have to see," said the younger daughter. She was the outspoken, honest one. "The thing is, Dad, it's tough explaining things to a child. What you are. What you should mean to them." For a long moment, she struggled with her words. Reticence was new to her, and Clay said, "I understand," with an honest compassion. "Do you understand?" she asked. "I'm not trying to be cruel. I really don't want you hurt . . . not at all!"

He had never been a good father, he realized now. Work had kept him away for long periods; the daughters were closest to their mother, still and always. They would ask for her early in the conversation, as if wanting to get past this obligatory noise. And sometimes Clay would have to stop and think for a moment, remembering where Laura had gone. "Walking," he said one morning. "She went hiking with friends, before work," and the daughter, the quiet older one, gave him a look that said everything. She didn't speak, shaking her head and halfway sighing — everything was clear and apparent to her, it seemed — and why was he fooling himself? Sometimes he would gaze at the bathroom mirror, wondering what sorts of people had time to burn on a weekday morning; and he would grow cold, honesty making his hands shake and his false mouth taste like an old brass pipe.

* * *

"WHERE DID we get these?"

Laura sounded irritated, standing over the various boxes that had been delivered in the afternoon. She stooped and read labels, then asked, "Why do we need new cameras?"

Clay said, "I ordered them."

That took some of the sting from her expression. "But why?"

"I wanted them." He explained how these were improved models with more sensitive optics, both in frequency range and light volume. "I want to see better," he declared. "That's all."

She made no sound, lips pursed and her breathing quick.

Why was she angry? Was it the cost? He told Laura, "They weren't *that* expensive," and she said, "I don't care what you do," and rose and strode away without another syllable.

Clay opened the boxes and spilled out the white foam worms, then he unwrapped the plastic envelopes to make an absolute identification of every item. The hypersensitive microphones would come tomorrow; he would install everything himself. First the kitchen, he decided. He had seen *something* in that room, and perhaps it was the same something Laura had heard on the stairs several weeks ago. Or it wasn't. It was too soon to name the phenomena or admit his silly thoughts to his wife . . . but a real excitement was welling up within him. He had a project, a new passion, and it was peculiar to his life. It belonged to no one else.

At one point he felt eyes staring at him, and he looked and caught Laura's smoldering gaze.

He feigned a cough, waiting for her to speak.

She kept quiet.

So he said, " What I want . . . I want to become the house."

"'Become the house.' What does that mean?"

"That's what I am now. This." He gestured in a theatrical fashion. "I want to be as alive here as I can manage. All right? Laura?"

"Whatever you want," she muttered.

"Do you understand?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Laura?"

"I suppose," she said. "It doesn't matter."

* * *

Clay stopped sleeping in the night. He put his body into bed and pretended to sleep, but his conscious self roamed through the glass cables within the walls, skipping from room to room and always watching. Always listening. Practice made him expert; the house was his private realm. He knew its corners and the tiny cracks and the unseen cubbyholes where dust collected undisturbed. He learned to recognize the creaking of individual boards as the air cooled and warmed. He knew the sounds water made when it moved within each pipe and the click of thermostats and the dry, swift patter of cockroach feet. Dust would stay suspended in the air long after it was disturbed; he could see individual motes of twirling dust with his newly purchased eyes, even by starlight. The same eyes showed him the uneven wear of their furniture and the fading colors and the matting of the carpets and the irregularities in the paint. The entire house had acquired a dynamic shabbiness. Flaws were endless and somehow comfortable, and he reveled in them. From the time Laura fell asleep until morning, without pause, Clay was a hunter sitting alert inside his blind, holding his electronic self motionless for long periods and every sense alive.

What was that? That sound?

Was something moving?

What is it?

What?

There was something inside their home, he was certain, and it coexisted with them. Clay thought of it as a phantom on some days, and other times it was a scientific puzzle lurking at the edges of vision and human consciousness. He was hunting a swift, imprecise prey, and he intended to corner and somehow study it, phantom or not; and then when he understood it, he would show the world he wasn't simply a glorified tombstone held prisoner and without worth.

Clay recorded everything seen and heard. There were lights without source, and kitchen utensils pushed an inch or two across the countertop — he made dutiful measurements — and several times he had heard footsteps in a hallway or on the staircase. The data mounted, and he tried to find patterns to the phenomena. When he wasn't sleeping in the day, he labored with graphs and maps and charts, using their cranky home computer and hiding the files from Laura. Nothing alone was as compelling

as that first sighting in the kitchen; but he hadn't been in the chase very long, he reasoned, and the phantom seemed more and more willing to show itself with time.

One night he was in the kitchen wall, soft gray twists of light collecting nearby, and then he heard footsteps above, and the twists were gone. Two phantoms? He slipped upstairs and found Laura standing over the bed with her nightgown bunched up in her hands and her eyes fixed on his motionless body. What was she doing? She bent and touched the thick black cord running from an outlet to his recharging batteries. What did she want? He thought of pretending to wake, all of a sudden, and asking what she wanted. But he didn't. He stopped himself and waited, and Laura turned after a minute and walked from the room. She went downstairs and through the kitchen, her pace steady and measured, and all the way Clay watched her without betraying his presence. She was trying to be silent, walking on her bare toes. Where was she going? She turned and began to descend the basement stairs, looking cold and moving slower. She had to feel cold, he thought. The damp, dark air made her hug herself, and she walked straight to the ceramic housing and the various important controls — colored buttons and dials that helped illuminate the room — and Laura opened the thick field manual and laid a hand on the buttons, reading something and then stopping. She did nothing for a long while. She wasn't looking at anything, her eyes unfocused and tired. Clay could see the lines on her face and the thin, scared mouth and the way her breath came through her nose too fast, like someone preparing to run. What would he say if he spoke? He tried to think of something appropriate. Laura closed the manual and then opened it again, ripping out a single page, and she folded the page twice and bent and flicked it beneath the massive housing, putting it out of easy reach. Clay knew what she had read; he didn't need to look for himself. Then she returned to bed, and he entered his body, asking, "What's wrong?" with a voice too awake and too forced to seem natural. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she managed.

"Is something wrong?" he pressed. "Laura?"

She sat up in bed and halfway looked at him, then she wiped her face with the backs of her hands.

"It's all right," Clay heard himself saying.

She said nothing.

"Laura?"

She took a breath and lifted her nightgown, and she threw a leg over him, straddling him, and she was moving against his hips with both of her hands running through her bright gray hair.

The next morning, very early, Laura told him, "I'll be late tonight." Her eyes were baggy and red; she had cried all night, in silence. "There's a party after work," she said as an afterthought. The lie was transparent. "Clay?"

"All right." Then he added, "Dear," and when she was dressed and gone, he felt halfway relaxed. Obvious subterfuge seemed like progress, he reflected, and he drifted to sleep and stayed asleep until evening.

Laura didn't come home. By midnight he knew she wouldn't be home for the night, and that was fine. Without her presence, he realized, there seemed to be more activity within the house. He heard footsteps on the staircase, and they lasted long enough for him to migrate to an appropriate camera and see nothing visible. But once, in the kitchen, he detected the momentary shape of someone standing beside the dishwasher — an imprecise form without any face or gender — and when the phantom moved, it vanished without any trace.

The solitude was bringing it out, thought Clay.

It didn't realize it wasn't alone — it felt safe — and suddenly he found himself hoping that Laura wouldn't come home again.

She arrived the next morning, early, but not to stay.

The man accompanying her didn't come inside. He simply stood beside her car with the motor running, his long hair catching the wind and his youngish face handsome and nervous. A small portion of Clay was almost proud of his wife. At her age, twice a grandmother, and she had been able to win herself a young lover. A cowardly one, he deducted. But undeniably young.

Clay stood in the open doorway and waved.

Laura said, "Just stop that," and pulled him aside. "We're going to have to talk, and now." She was frantic, saying, "I haven't slept. I don't remember when I slept last." She shivered and forced herself to look at his face, in the eyes, and she said, "I need a vacation. . . . I don't think I'm competent to decide anything now —"

"All right."

"Afterward . . . eventually . . . we're going to make changes."

"Whatever is best." Clay wanted to be the picture of reason and compromise. "Whatever you want."

She sighed and backed away from him, scared of what she wanted.

"Maybe we didn't think things through well enough," he allowed. "Maybe we need to come up with a different arrangement —"

"I just can't live here!" she blurted.

"Then don't live here."

"Can we pay for two households? How could we manage?"

He felt ill. He tried to collect his wits, then he said, "I can learn a new job," with a forced, hopeful voice. There were many careers where normal people could work at home. Why not —?

Laura was speaking, and Clay heard the single word:

"Alone."

"What was that?" he asked.

She was shaking her head, telling him, "You'll be here all the time, alone, and you know it. Don't kid yourself, dear."

His false stomache ached, and his vision seemed to blur.

"I'm going now," Laura promised.

He nodded.

"I'll try to come back . . . in a few weeks, eventually, and we'll decide everything. All right?"

"Fine."

She said, "I am sorry," and seemed to shrink before him.

Suddenly Clay felt angry. He considered shouting that he was alive, he felt wholly and wonderfully alive. . . . What was she thinking? What were they talking about now? He would fight her and fight anyone else who tried to harm him . . . !

"Good-bye," said Laura.

He remained silent, watching her leave with his gaze level and hard. Twice she almost looked back over her shoulder. Then her young man drove them away, and Clay watched the back of his wife's head and the man's long hair, and he tried imagining all three of them living here, coming to some kind of *arrangement* . . . and with that he sat on the floor, feeling nothing, crying warm tap water and shattering two plastic fingers against the frame of the doorway.

* * *

WITH EVENING he went into the kitchen and sat, freezing every limb and waiting with his eyes always opened, focused on the space where he had most often seen the phantom. He didn't have to wait long. For some reason — perhaps it was the emotional baggage floating in the air, he reasoned — the figure was particularly vivid tonight. It shimmered and coalesced and then became concrete, and Clay recognized himself in an instant. He felt a remarkable detachment upon staring at his own ghost as it stood with slumped shoulders and a focused attention, pushing a dirty butter knife back and forth on the tiled countertop.

There was a strange, unexpected humor to the moment.

This disembodied spirit had come from who-knew-where with a domestic chore on its mind. It was trying and failing to lift the knife with both hands. Such a prosaic haunting, thought Clay, and he almost laughed. He smiled without moving his face, and he studied the jeans and familiar work shirt worn by his ghost — thirty years old? thirty-five? —and he thought to himself.

What did this mean?

Perhaps some force, caring and supremely powerful, retained all souls upon the death of their bodies. At least my soul, he mused. Or maybe this meant nothing at all. Maybe time was a sloppy business full of holes and loops and moments when one could look backward. Or maybe this was just a mirage, some bundle of his original neurons emerging from the quantum stew. This phantom was no more profound or substantial than a photograph set in a drawer . . . could it be?

Clay felt an enormous frustration.

He opened his mouth and whispered, "Hello?"

The ghost made no response.

"Do you hear me?"

For an instant, no longer, the ghost seemed to listen to Clay. It cocked its head ever so slightly, and it paused. . . .

"How is it . . . where you live? Is it pleasant?" Clay asked, "Is it interesting? How did you get there? What are you? Can you answer me? Can you, please?"

A passing smile grew on the young face, a hint of wisdom or amusement showing for an instant. Then the ghost returned to the old butter knife, trying once again to grasp its smooth steel handle with the

insubstantial fingers. Clay watched the knife slide on the countertop, reach the lip, and teeter for an instant before tumbling to the floor. It struck with an explosive sound, then it skated partway toward him. He eyed the knife, then the ghost; and the ghost began to stupidly grope for the lost prize, the hands ranging from the sink to the microwave and back again.

Almost without sound, Clay slipped from his chair and crept forward. *Look at the idiot,* he thought to himself. *Senile and clumsy, and why bother? Why?* Yet he felt the knife in the shadows, and he grasped it and rose to his feet in a slow, steady motion. He was near the ghost, feeling its chill and surprised to find his plastic body shivering. He whispered, "Here. Take it." But the ghost paid no attention, reaching into one of its pants pockets and removing a single piece of folded paper no bigger than its palm.

Clay dropped the knife, feeling limp. Tired.

The ghost set the paper on the countertop and smiled for a moment, then shoved the paper toward Clay. It was almost looking at him, almost smiling; and Clay snatched up the paper and began to unfold it.

He recognized it in an instant.

The paper was real, and he could see the torn edge and the printed words. He remembered his wife putting this page under the ceramic housing, out of easy reach but not entirely gone; and he looked up in time to see the ghost nodding to itself, its face supremely satisfied —

— and Clay turned, starting for the basement door without having made any decision. Not yet. But on the stairs he found himself moving faster, and on the basement floor he practically ran, turning on lights and focusing on the precise technical instructions, doing the first step and then the second step, then the third . . . and he felt no different for all the buttons he pushed . . . his false heart pounding, the sweat in his phony eyes . . . and only at the end, his thumb hovering over the last button, did he think to pause and consider what he was doing . . . to make himself sure, after all. . . .



John Brunner has published over half a dozen "Mr. Secrett" stories in F&SF. The first, "The Man Who Could Provide Us With Elephants," appeared in our October 1977 issue. "The Man Who Lost the Game of Life" is quite a surprise in the "Mr. Secrett" genre. Read it, and you'll see what I mean. John's most recent novel, A Maze of Stars, *has just appeared from Del Rey. He has finished a near-future sf novel for Avon. But his novel production hasn't interfered with his short story output. We have another story of his that will appear in a future issue.*

The Man Who Lost the Game of Life

By John Brunner

I HAD BLOWN IT. At last I had completely, absolutely, and totally blown it. I sat at my desk on the morning of my fiftieth birthday and contemplated what the postman had delivered. The bank statement with the minus sign in front of the balance hadn't bothered me too much. I was used to those. Luckily the manager of my branch seemed to consider it an honor to have an Author as one of his customers, and anyhow, I always managed to generate more income sooner or later, even though I hated what I had to do to earn it.

No, it was the other item that told me I was done for — doomed —finished. In a word: ruined.

And all because, although I have descended to some pretty disgusting shifts during my career, to quote e.e. cummings, "there is some s—— I will

not eat."

Last Friday, Mr. Agent had instructed me to write half a dozen first-person accounts of molestation and rape by alien beings so that Laszlo Perkins could incorporate them as fact in his next certain-to-be-a-best-seller, *The UFO Sex Maniacs Are Coming!* One was to be female-vaginal, one female-anal, one male-anal, one male-oral, and the last pair were to be "by" parents convinced that their underage children, one boy and one girl, were telling the truth about what aliens had done to their orifices. P.S.: they all need to be white and middle class for easier reader identification.

In the past I have demeaned myself many times, to keep body and soul together. I have written on average between a third and a half of all bar one of Laszlo Perkins's books (the exception being *Pointing the Bone**), and provided the background material for most of the rest. For my trouble I have been paid between one-tenth and one-twentieth of what Laszlo received, and *no* share of the royalties. I'm not proud — I can't afford to be — but this was too much to stomach, and I said so.

Now here was a furious letter from Mr. Agent, saying that since I was turning down the assignments he had worked so hard to obtain, he was no longer prepared to represent me.

What a birthday present

I gazed around my home. Nowadays they call a place like mine a "studio"; but to me, it was still what it had always been: a bed-sitter. Mentally, I listed all the things I'd looked forward to in my youth, but had never achieved. I had never married, never had children, never managed to buy a house or even a flat with more than one room. I had once owned a secondhand Ford, but I'd found running it too expensive. There were eighty-seven books on a lopsided brag shelf opposite the door, but only eight of them bore my own name, the rest being ghosted or under pseudonyms. Sometimes I wondered why I bothered to keep them there. Nobody ever called on me who might be impressed. Anyhow, if someone were to look them over, I'd have to explain why I mixed in my work with all these other people's.

The days were long gone when, to cure a fit of writer's block, I could look at that shelf for reassurance.

**See "The Man with a Taste for Turkeys" (F&SF, May 1989).*

Sighing, I reached for the phone and dialed Mr. Agent's number, preparing to eat as much humble pie as he demanded. His snooty secretary, on learning who was calling, said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Scrivener, but I have a note here saying you are no longer a client of this firm."

And cut me off.

When you've been a free-lance writer for a quarter of a century, there isn't really a great deal else you can do. Once, I tried to claim unemployment benefits on the grounds that, having had a book rejected by a publisher who commissioned it, I'd effectively been out of work for six months. They wouldn't go for that. I could, I suppose, go and say I was no longer a writer — what other sort of job could they offer? But who would take on a fifty-year-old with no experience? Was I to wind up sweeping streets? Getting up at 5:00 A.M. to deliver milk? With nearly 2 million unemployed, there must presumably be queues for even that kind of menial task.

I brooded for an hour over a cup of extremely dilute instant coffee, which started out tasting merely nasty, but, when it grew cold, became revolting. Then, with a sense of utter despair, I reached for a notebook —actually, it was a thirteen-year-old pocket diary, abandoned at the time when I gave up all hope of one day publishing my memoirs — in which I'd jotted down ideas for plots and characters. I knew from experience that I could no longer decipher most of them, but conceivably, inspiration might strike as I turned the pages. As it happened, I didn't need to turn them, for the little book promptly fell open at a familiar name.

Of course. It had been back then that I first encountered Mr. Secrett.

I wrestled long and hard with my conscience. I have always shied away from exploiting my friends for professional purposes. (In spite of all, I do still have a friend or two.) But was Mr. Secrett really a friend? I'd known him for a long while, granted; we'd bumped into one another in unexpected places, certainly; even so — a friend?

In the end, what tipped the scales were two simple facts. On the one hand, Mr. Secrett had known a lot of famous people and a good few not so famous, from California to Africa and over much of Europe. With or without his permission, I could cobble together a book from the yarns he'd told me, while casting around for a new agent. And on the other

On the other, I simply couldn't think what else to do.

* * *

The library of the Royal Society for Applied Linguistics had changed little since my first visit. The smell was a trifle less musty, a fact I attributed to the retirement — or ought I to say discontinuance? — of the shuffling, gray-faced helpers I recalled from the old days,* and their welcome replacement by lively, sometimes even cheerful, volunteers from overseas working for bare expenses. They had to be volunteers; the society's funds hardly covered Mr. Secrett's salary and the few score new accessions he authorized each year. Last time I'd come here, I'd met a couple from Vanuatu, trading a few hours of work per day for the chance to consult otherwise-unobtainable historical records owed to nineteenth-century missionaries; the time before, two African women on a similar errand. For some reason, Mr. Secrett's aides this year were white Australians. If they'd been aborigines, I could have understood it; oral transmission has its drawbacks even in a culture like theirs. Maybe they were just visitors glad of a way to supplement their means.

As ever, there were a few patrons present, the type of person one seems to meet only in the older and dustier sort of library: fat women in cardigans with pink-rimmed spectacles, elderly men wearing greasy raincoats with briefcases before them whence they surreptitiously extracted peanuts or bits of cheese sandwich when the attendants weren't watching. Everything, in sum, looked very normal.

A trifle relieved — so many of my visits to Mr. Secrett's library have been linked to a problem or even a major setback in my life that I always have to prepare for the worst when I venture in — I approached the scratched mahogany desk facing the main door, where he presided in a swivel chair once handsomely upholstered in plum-colored velvet, but long reduced to the stage where the canvas backing showed through.

He was busily scratching away with a pen — a real old-fashioned pen with a steel nib — and for a moment failed to register my presence. Then the pen ran dry, and as he reached to dip it in the inkwell, he glanced up. For a long moment, he appeared not to recognize me.

And I nearly failed to recognize him.

I'd always known him as hale and hearty: lean, often tanned, with a good head of hair and excellent appetite. Of a sudden he had *shrunk*. His

**See "The Man Who Could Provide Us with Elephants" (F&SF, October 1977).*

cheeks were hollow; there were dark bags under his eyes; the hand that grasped his pen was almost skeletal. His jacket hung loose about his shoulders, as though it had been draped by mistake over a child-sized clothes hanger.

How old could he be? I'd never given much thought to that before. I knew he was considerably my senior — after all, he had been an officer in the Second World War — so. . . : At least seventy, then. Nonetheless, I had expected him to carry on unchanged for a good while longer. He didn't smoke; he went on lengthy walking tours; he ate, and drank beer and wine, with manifest enjoyment, but never to excess; in a sense he was rather like the kind of person I myself was resigned to becoming . . . save that I had never been able to afford walking tours. Or, more exactly, travel to the Harz or the Pyrenees, which were his favorite destinations.

I stood there more or less dumbstruck while he removed his glasses, fumbled around for another pair, put those on, and studied me through them. After a heartbreaking pause, a broad smile spread across his lined face. Before he could speak, however, one of the female patrons arrived with a book she wanted to make photocopies from. Slowly, but with the smoothness of long habit, Mr. Secrett changed his glasses again, checked the date of the publication, confirmed that it predated modern copyright conventions, signed the pro forma granting permission, and summoned one of his young Australians, handing him a key to unlock the copier room.

That gave me a chance to digest the unpalatable truth. Despite his forceful personality and undoubted intellect, Mr. Secrett had since our previous meeting crossed the border into the unenviable zone of old age.

EVEN HIS voice had grown thin and wheezy, as I learned when he eventually croaked out a greeting — though it was a typical Secrett sentiment that he expressed.

"Well, well! Scrivener! What brings you here? The need to lend plausibility to another of Mr. Perkins's lies?"

I dismissed everything I had had in mind to say. Quite unexpectedly, I felt overwhelmed by pity. Oh, I'd never liked Mr. Secrett very much — I'd always evaded his invitations to call on him at home; I'd never extend an invitation to him myself Why? If nothing else, he was incontestably a fascinating raconteur. I had to admit that basically it was because he had

done things and gone places that I envied. Chained down by my ambition to remain (as my bank manager apparently envisaged it) an Author, I had never cut loose, never taken a year off to backpack across India or drive all around both the Americas, as I'd once dreamed of doing. Into the bargain, of course, he had so often turned up in my life and furnished the solution to a mystery — too late — that to envy, I had to add frank resentment.

I felt ashamed on both counts.

"I happened to be in the area," I lied. "Passing a pub around the corner, I remembered we once had lunch there. So I dropped in to ask whether you're free for lunch today."

Mr. Secrett beamed. His thin lips drew back from false teeth that were visibly too large for his shrunken gums.

"Scrivener, old chap, that's awfully decent of you! I'll accept with pleasure." He glanced at the white-dialed, black-figured clock on the library wall that always reminded me — unpleasantly — of school. "As a matter of fact, I see no reason why we shouldn't pop along at once. Let me just. . . ."

He raised a bony arm and waved. The second Australian responded.

"I'm going for a pint of lunch with my distinguished friend Mr. Scrivener. The writer, you know!"

The young man plainly didn't, but he accorded me an affable nod before turning back to his duties. Meantime, Mr. Secrett hauled himself to his feet — I could almost hear his joints creaking — possessed himself of a black walking stick with a cross handle, and maneuvered out from behind his desk.

It was a slow trip to the pub.

Half a pint of beer later, however, he recovered some of his former spirits. Fork poised to dig into a portion of cottage pie and fried onions, he fixed me with his old sharp gaze.

"Let's cut the cackle, shall we, Scrivener? I never knew you to turn to me except when you had a problem. Well, I've never minded helping old friends. . . . So what brings you today? Mr. Perkins, as I suggested? I see he's lately closed a deal for another ludicrous advance."

I was chewing an especially tough mouthful of steak sandwich: boot-sole leather between slices of foamed plastic flavored with a smear of tomato sauce. By the time I managed to swallow, I'd decided to be completely candid.

Mr. Secrett heard me out, frowning occasionally, once or twice even nodding. In retrospect, I calculated it must have been the longest period in all our meetings when I'd done so much uninterrupted talking; usually it had been the other way round. At length, abandoning half his food, he mopped his mustache with his paper napkin, leaned back with his near-empty beer mug in both hands, and staring down into it, said something that shook me to the core.

He said, "Well, you could always take over from me."

The lunchtime racket of the pub continued — young men chatting up pretty girls from their offices, older men haggling over business deals, local residents wishing it were evening and these invaders were off their turf — but it was as though I were isolated from the rest of the world by a screen, or a veil, or a membrane. I kept rehearing and rehearing Mr. Secrett's incredible offer.

Mistaking my reason for not replying, he drank the last of his beer and said as he set aside the mug, "It's not a bad sort of post, you know, old chap. Of course, I'm old enough to remember when a thousand a year was a pretty good screw, so now when I say a thousand a month, I tend to think of it as riches beyond the dreams of, and all that. But the board members do what they can, and they always finance a couple of assistants — so, really, it's no sort of grind. Besides, like me, you don't suffer from expensive tastes, do you? I've always been happier noshing in a pub like this than at even the most expensive kind of restaurant —"

"But I have no training as a librarian!" I burst out.

He raised one eyebrow. Last time I'd seen him, those eyebrows had been salt-and-pepper-colored. Now they were completely gray, and the eyes below were streaked with red.

"Nor I," he said composedly. "My entire training took a single afternoon. My predecessor, Eric Sawfreed, about whom I remember telling you,* developed such a splendid catalog that when I took over, Jerry Prendergast needed only to give me, as it were, a guided tour. Then he handed me two single-spaced sheets of foolscap, and there I was, in charge. Of course, I was a bit nervous to begin with, especially since, in those postwar years, I couldn't recruit enough assistants and had to take care of practically

**See "The Man with a God That Worked" (F&SF, December 1980).*

everything myself — but I remember telling you, not long after we first met, how I got around that one."

You didn't, I glossed silently. *But you certainly left me in no doubt!*

I suppressed a shudder — and, to my own surprise, failed to suppress the question that accompanied it.

"Why didn't you — uh — carry on with that system?"

He snorted. "The bishop got to hear!"

"What bishop?"

Mr. Secrett looked at me severely. He seemed quite to have recovered his old forcefulness.

"The bishop of Bulminster, who else? Ex officio chairman of the RSAL Endowment Fund. He gave me a considerable carpeting, though I must admit that when I explained the economic reasons, he proved quite reasonable after all, and organized a near doubling of our income within the next twelve months. Matter of fact, he managed our fund so well he quit the church, and by the time he was sixty, he'd made a cool million out of unsavory property in the less-reputable parts of London. Talk about 'consorting with publicans and sinners'! They never actually referred to 'the bishop of Bulminster's geese,' but they might as well have. You get the reference, I trust?" he interpolated as an aside.

I nodded. In Elizabethan days, "bishop of Winchester's geese" was a term for London prostitutes because the said prelate derived so much of his income from brothels.

Mr. Secrett went on, with what I'm sure he meant to be a reassuring smile: "Of course, you wouldn't have to contend with him. The present incumbent is what I believe is nowadays termed a pussycat. At all events, he's never given me a moment's trouble. One way and another, you know, old chap, the post is pretty well a sinecure."

And before I could say more, he forced himself to his feet with the aid of his stick, waving aside my offer of help, and pushed his way to the bar for a refill.

Fortunately, we were using mugs with handles on.

During his absence, I felt as though I were tossing coins inside my mind. Heads, I do this, and that will happen, and I won't like it. Tails, I do this, which could be marginally better, though still not very promising. Landing on edge. . . .

Yes, I know it's traditionally accorded a probability of zero, but I once read a letter in *New Scientist*, attesting that a research team tossing a coin under laboratory conditions had witnessed such an event.

I revised my opinion of what was happening. It wasn't that I was tossing coins in my imagination. It was more like being the tossed coin. And, much against my will, I kept coming back and back to the conclusion that I had indeed landed on edge. . . .

When Mr. Secrett set down the newly filled mugs on our table, I said, with an attempt at jocularity, "Well, it's kind of you to suggest this. But I'll have a long wait, won't I? You must be good for a fair while yet! Or have you decided to get while the going's good?"

Instantly I regretted the words. Mr. Secrett, poised in the act of raising his beer to his lips, gave me a frosty and reproving look.

After a pause, and a quick swig:

"I'm sure you meant that kindly, Scrivener, old chap. Unfortunately, you're wrong." He achieved a smile, ghastly though it was. "You can scarcely have overlooked the way I've changed since our last encounter. It's because I'm dying. I have cancer."

"My dear fellow!" I heard my voice utter the words, but they were words of Mr. Secrett's generation, not my own. "If I'd had the slightest inkling —!"

He cut in, though with not a hint of malice.

"You'd have acted exactly as you've always done. Don't try to apologize. You are the sort of person you are, so am I, so are we all, and there's no point in pretending otherwise."

Leaving me abashed, he proceeded to sink half his new pint of beer. And continued as he set it down:

"Still, there seems to be a sign, as it were, of the finger of fate at work today. I telephoned the hospital this morning, to be told that my cancer has disseminated and is now incurable; and on the same day, you received this ultimatum from your agent that implies you can no longer make a living from your pen."

I was about to object that in fact I used an Amstrad word processor —had even paid off the installments on it — when I managed to overcome my usual huffiness and remember I was speaking to someone as doomed as I was, and in a far more absolute fashion.

Who was extending a necessary lifeline. . . .

There was nothing conscious about my decision. I felt in the grip of an exterior force, making up my mind for me with no possibility of argument. In a way, it was a welcome change from my usual state of dithering. I said, "Well, if you're *sure* I don't need any specialist training—"

"I didn't have any, and I'm sure you're just as smart as I was when I took over from old Prendergast! Drink up! We'll go back to the shop and get things organized!"

"What sort of things?" I ventured.

"Oh!" A shrug of his bony shoulders that almost spilled the beer he was raising. "You'll have to be presented to the board, of course, that kind of thing. But don't worry! The bishop has long been intimating" — a cough, a modest casting-down of gaze — "that things have gone so smoothly under my regime, the post is, so to say, in my gift. And I must admit, you know, I've had my eye on you for quite a while. One doesn't meet all that many people who are ideal for a particular niche. In fact, I dare say you're the only person I ever ran across so suitable for mine."

An eerie echo resounded in my memory: Mr. Secrett saying, as he had on so many occasions, "There are some people who seem destined for the culs-de-sac of history. . . ."

I'm one, and I suspect you're another.

But though it was present in my mind, I managed to stop the second sentence from being fully verbalized by pouring the rest of my beer down my throat.

What the hell. Nothing better is going to come my way, not now. I might as well make the most of what I'm offered.

And the promise even of a meager twelve-thousand pounds a year —the sort of wages they pay a trainee policeman these days — suddenly seemed infinitely attractive. It might not be much, but it would be assured and regular.

I'd never had a regular income. I should have added that to my list of things I'd never enjoyed.

Setting down my empty mug, I said huskily, "O.K."

He gripped my hand with incredible strength, given the bird-claw boniness of his own. His eyes were so bright they almost dazzled me.

What I heard him say was, "Old chap, you don't know what a weight you've taken off my mind! I wasn't certain I could count on you, but I dared to hope, and here it is all turning out right for both of us!"

But what I read in those piercing eyes was something else. Not relief, as he implied. Satisfaction? Triumph?

Smugness, as at a well-planned coup brought off against the odds?

I couldn't tell, and had no opportunity to wonder. We regained the library in half the time it had taken us to reach the pub.

ALL WENT as smoothly as predicted. When I was shown the ropes, I realized he was right: the RSAL's cataloging system was superb. It wasn't orthodox UDC, but someone had invested considerable effort in writing a user-friendly program running on an IBM clone that automatically converted references in both directions, so loan applications from other libraries could be swiftly processed. It was hard to reconcile the idea of it being Mr. Secrett's own work with the picture of him dipping a steel nib in an inkwell, but he demonstrated its operations with such aplomb that I couldn't help asking.

He shook his head regretfully.

"No, I came across this miraculous box of tricks too late in life, I'm afraid. I owe it to a friend I did a favor for. It won't give an up-to-date young chap like you any trouble, though, I'm sure."

I suppressed a hollow laugh. I'd aged a good twenty years since opening Mr. Agent's letter. . . .

The following week, over dry sherry and biscuits, I met the bishop —did you know the Church of England rejoices in a bishop with the resounding name of Theodosius Wagstaff? I felt as though I'd walked into a Trollope novel — and the rest of the relevant committee of the RSAL. I was passed on the nod, signed a contract, and turned up for work the very next day.

It was as well. Mr. Secrett was running out of time.

After the funeral, at which I was the only genuine mourner — the bishop didn't show, but "sent a representative," which I thought was pretty shabby — I was leaving the crematorium, when a pallid young man in a gray suit addressed me by name. I glanced around. Proffering a card that identified him as a legal executive with quite a well-known firm, he went on, "You are, I am told, Mr. Secrett's successor as librarian at the —"

I cut him short, demanding to know his business. In response, he produced a registered envelope, addressed to me in care of his employers

and bearing the injunction *TO BE DELIVERED AFTER MY DEMISE.*

Puzzled, I took it. My fingers reported instantly that it contained a key — not a flat, Yale-type key, but a large iron one, old-fashioned as a steel-nibbed pen.

The pallid one said, "You are to open it on returning to the library. Please sign this receipt."

Numbly, I did, and he departed with a toothy grin.

Back at work — I'd expected the library to be closed for the day as a token of respect, but obviously the bishop hadn't thought of it, and I wasn't sufficiently used to being in charge to issue the order myself —I opened the envelope. It was a quiet afternoon.

A slip of paper within, in Mr. Secrett's crabbed writing, informed me that this key gave access to a room in the basement that he termed the Librarian's Sanctum. He added — I could hear his awkwardly jocular tones: "It's another perk, old chap! In fact, this key is the key to all the perks you can enjoy in your new post. Not having been able to hand it over personally, I haven't had the chance to explain in advance. But I'm sure the imaginative Mr. Scrivener will have no difficulty in figuring things out. By the way, I hope you won't be too annoyed at one of the things you find. Believe me, everything has turned out for the best, even though you may not think so. Yet."

Plus his illegible initials. Long as I had known him, I had never found out his forenames, not even today. There had been no prayers or sermon at the funeral; he had forbidden it. Just the consignment of his body to the fire.

An eerie though crossed my mind. Had he chosen cremation because he knew from experience what use could be made of an intact corpse?

Suppressing the horrible idea, I told the Australians to mind the shop for a while, and I set off in search of this mysterious sanctum.

It proved to lie at the end of a dark corridor I had already been shown, lined with shelvesful of neglected books, duplicate copies kept in the hope that one day they might be traded to another library, damaged copies awaiting the pennies from Heaven that would finance rebinding, and unwanted donations. I had noticed the door, but assumed it led to a broom cupboard or the like.

The key turned easily in a well-oiled lock. The hinges moved just as soundlessly. There were no windows down here, of course. I fumbled for a

light switch and found one so old it rotated like a gas tap. And saw. . . .

What can I compare it to? The junk room of a museum, perhaps? Carven idols jostled with juju symbols; crude paintings hung above boxes of charms and primitive weapons; a naked skull grinned from atop a pile of badly cured furs and reptile skins. Instant conviction overcame me. This must be where, ever since the early days of the society, items shipped home by missionaries who were also enthusiastic ethnologists had been hidden on the grounds that they were too pagan for display within the walls of a respectably Christian foundation . . . and perhaps too dangerous. (I recalled Mr. Secrett's reminiscences about a man who chanced across a god with real power to help his worshipers.)*

There were also a chair and a table. On the table stood something under a faded red velvet cover, the same shade as the chair that I'd inherited. (That reminded me: I *must* requisition for its recovering or replacement.) Moved by impulse, I lifted the cloth.

An instant later I was wishing I hadn't.

There was a photograph of myself in a Victorian ebony frame. Over it, like a meat cover to keep flies off, had been placed a cage of bamboo slivers, the sort they use in the Far East for chirping crickets. Surrounding it were symbols of capture: magnets, rough pebbles that I knew at once for lodestone, loops of wire in the form of poacher's snares (memory stirred again, this time supplying the image of a rabbit's scut poised in midair above an overgrown path),** even a ribbon of yellow parchment bearing words in a script I failed to recognize.

Sluggish as lava, truth began to ooze in from the edges of my mind. I made to throw the velvet back across the table, but as I raised it, something fell: a folded paper. Reflexively, I picked it up.

And found out what Mr. Secrett had *really* bequeathed me.

It wasn't just a few minutes I spent in the sanctum. It was a solid hour, and by the time I went upstairs again, my assistants were fretting. Three patrons were demanding the key to the photocopier, and another wanted to sign out a book and take it home. Him I refused, although in my time I had borrowed many books from here; my first decision in my new role had

*"*Man with a God*"

**See "The Man Who Understood Carboniferous Flora" (F&SF, April 1978).*

been to forbid removal of books from the premises. Over thirty valuable first editions appeared on the unaccounted-for list. Me, I'd been honest enough (or fool enough?) to bring back the ones I borrowed.

A row ensued. Normally I hate arguments. This one didn't touch me. My mind was elsewhere. The anger I had felt when I realized how Mr. Secrett had contrived that I take over his job had lasted only briefly. The potential implicit in the way he'd done it was infinitely more important. Already I was compiling a target list in my head: first and foremost Laszlo Perkins, then Mr. Agent, then. . . .

Slowly, however, I reverted to normality as ordinary matters preoccupied me again. By closing time I was on the verge of laughing at myself. How could I have believed, even for a moment, that Mr. Secrett's mumbo jumbo was what had ensured me his place? How could I have found the notion plausible that primitive artifacts in a musty basement were keys to revenge, success, wealth, power? (Albeit in small, ungreedy quantities. . . .) Ah, the only sensible thing to do with the contents of the sanctum would be to call in experts from the British Museum. Some of the stuff might prove quite valuable, and I was sure the bishop would welcome such a windfall. Provided I could retain the money for my library instead of dissipating it in the society's general fund. . . .

"G'night!" shouted my Australians.

I answered, glancing around for any item requiring last-moment attention. I spotted the registered envelope and made to toss it in the wastebin.

My eye fell on the stamps. They were from a series long obsolete.

Suddenly I realized what ought to have struck me as odd about that photograph downstairs.

In it I looked younger.

To be exact: by thirteen years.

And this envelope's postmark was thirteen years old.

Talk about being a marked man . . . !

I've forgiven Mr. Secrett now. Partly it's because I've progressed from being resigned to my situation to being reconciled to it. Despite the research I'm engaged in, I find I can fit in quite a lot of writing during working hours, much though I hate copy-typing it when I get home. But one has always needed to revise and polish, anyway.

And partly it's because I was right the first time, as were the wary clerics who locked away the artifacts that Mr. Secrett exploited to such good effect. Guided by the directions he left me, I'm making fair progress in their use. You saw, for instance, that the Inland Revenue's third attempt to convict Laszlo Perkins for tax evasion resulted in a thumping great fine? And how a certain well-known literary agency has suffered a sudden hemorrhage of its most-famous clients?

Mm-hm.

I've been rereading Borges lately. He was a librarian, too. I find something curiously attractive about the idea of devoting the autumn of one's life to work on projects not destined for publication.

But there remains, of course, one task I have to undertake before I can relax into total freedom from ambition. I need, like Mr. Secrett, to arrange a successor.

Mr. Agent, as I mentioned, is down on his luck. He has a literary background, of a sort, and not much to look forward to in twenty years.

I think I might quite sensibly consider him.

Editorial (from page 8)

about people as ordinary as we are, caught in extraordinary events, forced by circumstances to make that one small gesture, that one action which will save a life or change the world. There are examples of this kind of fiction every month in these pages.

Such fiction is more than an escape. It is practice. A way of realizing that we all have heroic moments, moments of courage. A way of understanding that heros are not tapped into some unreachable cosmic force, any more than the rest of us are.

Some day each one of us will have to choose whether or not to stand on top of a tank, and sing before a hostile audience, to show the world, in our small way, what exactly we believe in. Sometimes those actions will be rewarded. Usually they won't. That doesn't matter. What does matter is that we had the courage to follow our fictional role models, to become the person who effects change, no matter how small. And for that brief moment, to become the hero, the real-life role model.

For who is to say what inspires people to stand on top of tanks to hold back war? Yeltsin was young once too, a boy with dreams, like the rest of us. I wonder what books rest on his shelf. I wonder if some of the same ones rest on mine.



BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Needful Things, Stephen King, Viking, $24.95

The Face of the Waters, Robert Silverberg, Bantam, $20.00

L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future, Vol. VII. Algis Budrys, Ed. Bridge, $5.95

NEEDFUL THINGS is the best Stephen King in a long, long time. It has pace, characterization, suspense and — this is the thing that King is often so weak on — a genuine ending. I really like this book.

It is billed as the last Castle Rock story, and in truth it seems difficult to see how King could go back to this locale, so thoroughly is it destroyed by the time this book is finished. (Castle Rock, for those of you who don't know, is a Maine town King has used several times as the setting for some of his stories; it is also difficult to see how the inhabitants have time to earn a living, or to go about the business of daily life, so beset have they been over the years.)

And, to tell the truth, I believe the problem of Polly's arthritis is never really solved. But if that's the order of magnitude we're talking about in seeking some less than perfect point in this book, we're going too far. *Needful Things* is a fantasy about the devil opening a shop in a small New England town and raising hell thereafter; given that, we take it on from there. From there, it's OK if Polly's arthritis gets neglected in the end. After all, she does get to keep her immortal soul. This strikes me as more important.

I will not tell you more about the plot, because that would be a real disservice to this book. The plot is dead simple; what holds the reader's interest is the various ways in which various specific people make it work out. Take my word for it — it's quite satisfactorily gruesome. Time after time.

Also, you will not notice the writing style. This is Stephen King's "transparent" mode; a seemingly simple, actually subtle placement

of one word after another in an intricate mosaic that looks like an accident. This is, I think, the hardest style of all for a writer to work with, and we have very few better at it than King.

What I *would* like to talk about for a few moments is the way King keeps delivering. It has now been a very long time since his first book; writers of a certain promise have come and gone; writers with smash best-sellers have come, stayed around for a while, and disappeared. King not only writes best-sellers, he always writes best-sellers, and he does not fade away.

Writers like that are few and far between. And I don't think there's any doubt that King is, among that select company, the best. What accounts for this?

I think it's more than an impressive technical armamentarium. He does have a variety of styles, and a variety of plots, and a variety of modes; far more than most. When we consider that one man wrote "The Breathing Method" *and* "The Body;" "Carrie" *and* "It," "Firestarter" *and* "Cujo," for a very small sample of what you would think it would take six writers to do, we contemplate an extraordinary talent. But there are others who can do that; not many, but some. King has something more; an unmatched imagination.

That, I think, is the essential King has that no one else has to a similar extent. When you consider not just the many stories, but how *dissimilar* they are; not only how dissimilar they are but how good they are, no matter what kind . . . there really is no one like him.

Yes, he loses interest quite often, and blows off the ending. Yes, he has the most curious series of errors — Hearst for Hurst, the wrong year for the Plymouth in "Christine," Garand rifles a good ten years before they were invented, four-door Scouts, Pintos with spring-loaded needle valves — not just errors, but seemingly crucial errors . . . and no one, certainly not I, has claimed that King on any given book is perfect. Sometimes, he isn't even satisfactory, in any technical sense. But the errors, while fun for critics to play with, don't seem to matter a damn to the readers. The blown-off endings come on books which, taken as a whole, are not satisfactory but are memorable. I wish he did not make the mistakes, because they seem emminently researchable, and because the books would be better if they did not exist. I wish he would carry out the ambitious scope of his books clear to the last page, because, again, they would be better books. But even though most of his work is flawed in one way or the other, the

premises on which the books are built are so much fun, so outrageous, some of them, that even a flawed King book is preferable to the perfect but lesser book by some other writer. (Assuming, for a moment, that a perfect book actually exists, somewhere.)

I like King . . . more every day, as it happens. I like *Needful Things* better than all but a very few King books. Much more important, I think you will like *Needful Things* too. But the most important thing is that we and King are in a perfect partnership; he keeps thinking of things we want to see spun out in detail, and then he spins them.

I should be ashamed of such a fall out of critical objectivity, I suppose. But I'm not.

Robert Silverberg has written twenty or forty books I wish I had written. True, I would have written them differently, but that, too, is the point, which I will not explain further. If you are a writer, you will know what I mean.

The book we have to consider in the present context is *The Face of the Waters*, which Bantam is bringing us for $20. The problem, though, is that it is doing so while ignoring the fact that it is already remaindered in England. Something has gone wrong with this Bob Silverberg book in particular; it is instructive to see what that is.

It is not the scope of the book, nor the idea for it. The idea is that, some generations before the story opens, the Sun went nova, and most of the human race, and the planet, Earth, perished. Only here and there are there outposts of humanity among the stars, and whether some of them are considerable or not, on the planet Hydros people are barely tolerated. A few hundred live on Hydros, a world apparently 100 percent covered by an ocean, dotted here and there with artificial floating islands built by the Gillies, a sort of humanoid race which pretty much represents the top of the evolutionary ladder on Hydros. It's a little hard to tell, because they don't communicate well with humans.

At any rate, there are lots of sentient beings on Hydros, large and small, living in the ocean, and some are casually deadly to humans. The rest pretty much are actively hostile.

There is no way off Hydros. It is the end of the line, and the humans who live there, in precarious balance with the environment, live on various islands, which float around in a complex pattern. The island we are particularly concerned with is Sorve Island, on which a band of about seventy humans have lived for several generations. They live

pretty primitively. Everybody does. The Gillie culture is difficult to understand; they have been building an electrical generation system for some time, but are largely stone age in other ways.

The viewpoint character is Valben Lawler, the human doctor, fortyish, and a bachelor now that his wife, whom he has not stopped loving, one day shipped out for another island and has never been heard from again. Lawler moons over her. And he wishes he knew more about the Gillies. He wishes he knew as much as his dead father, who was the doctor before him and actually helped the Gillies crack a nasty plague. But what he mostly does is drink numbweed, which enables him to get from one day to the next. Days are pretty much the same.

Until Nid Delagard, among other things the owner of a small fleet that traffiks from island to island, offends the Gillies. Then nothing will fix the problem; all humans must be off the island in a month.

All attempts at suasion fail; the sentence is irrevocable. In the end, a fleet of ships, small in number, small in individual size, sets off with all the sixty-odd humans on board. Where are they going?

Where. Nid — on whose flagship Lawler embarks — has his radio man call various islands in an effort to find one that will take all the refugees from Sorve. But none will. Some will take a few, but this option is unacceptable; broken up, the Sorve humans will lose their identity, and a chapter in human history will, it seems to them, be lost. Finally, Delagard declares that the most distant island, Graveyard, will take them all, and they set course.

But it turns out, after an interval in which various fascinating adventures befall Lawler and the others, that Gravyard did *not* offer to take them. Where they are sailing for instead is the Face of the Waters — a forbidden island continent (?), on the other side of the planet, of which only the most sketchy tales have ever been told, and on which Delagard hopes to find a place to live.

O.K. So far, so good. The tale Silverberg is spinning out is replete with menace and a kind of beauty; the ships plough through many exotic life forms, some of which drag crew members overboard, some of which spray them with various deadly poisons, and some of which are good to eat. One has a sense of Silverberg bringing the story ever closer to a grand denouement, and meanwhile inventing, inventing, and never flagging.

But things start to go subtly wrong. For one thing, all the other

ships disappear, all but one of them presumably in a passing cataclysm. But we do not see this. The one ship did the same a few pages back. And we did not see that, either. And the first suspicion grows; can it be that Silverberg is jettisoning all those crews because he does not know what to do with them. There is, for instance, the ship crewed by the Sisters, apparently a community of women with nun-like characteristics, who abhor men. This is an idea that seems to have, finally, proven unfruitful to Silverberg, because we never hear of them again. But I think most readers would have liked to.

Then, crewmen die on Nid's ship, and there is neither any particular reason for which ones are to die nor any particular *un*reason. There is, in other words, no sense that Silverberg planned these deaths one page before he got to them. And there is the affair with Sundira, who says she loves Lawler and falls in his arms — but not his arms exclusively — and this would seem to require an explanation which we never get.

Finally, after many perils, many of them fatal, they arrive at the Face of the Waters, the peculiarly named continent(?), which turns out to be very little like what we were led to expect either from old traveller's tales or Sundira's sometime researches among the Gillies. It could not support a castaway for years — In which case where did Lawler's boyhood confidant come from? — nor does it seem to contain the sort of deadliness against which Sundira was warned.

In the end, all the surviving crewfolk fall under the island's (?) spell, and go ashore, there presumably to live happily ever after, maybe. The island is somehow God; all creatures on Hydros are linked, and everything the crew had experienced was designed to lead them hither . . . a proposition which I, for one, doubt very strongly. What it reads like to me, much more, is as if Silverberg had to finally come up with an explanation to justify the evocative incidents that he had been writing more or less *ad libitum*. The explanation given in the text simply does not hold water — too many of the said incidents contradict it.

I may be wrong. The whole structure of this book may in fact be tightly organized toward an end, had I but the wit to see it. But there is the other explanation — that this began as a half idea in Silverberg's head, evocative and compelling, and that he began to write it, thinking that somehow it would resolve itself satisfactorily. And as good as the first nine-tenths of the book are is a measure of how dis-

appointing the last tenth is. Maybe. I said maybe.

I will not, of course, really review *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future, Vol. VII.* I will do what I do every year — describe it.

WOTF, as we tend to call it around the house, is an annual anthology, resulting from L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future and Illustrators of the Future Contests. The Contests, for amateur writers and illustrators, are not directly connected to the book, and the Contest prizes are given on pure merit, no strings, no entry fee. The book, which prints the Writers' Contest stories, the Illustrators' Contest illustrations, plus however many Finalist stories fit, makes a separate payment to all concerned.

This year, there are fifteen stories, including Merritt Severson's "A Plumber's Tale" and James C. Glass's "Georgi." Both — like the other stories — are quite good. All the stories are good, I think; 14 judges, including some of the most stellar names in science fiction, fantasy and horror, said so. The reason I mention these two in particular is that in the case of the Glass, he won an additional $4,000 as the grand prize writer of the year; in the case of the Severson, Sergey V. Poyarkov did the illustration, and Sergey is not only the $4,000 winner of the grand prize for illustration, he is from Kiev, in the Ukraine, although when he entered the Contest he was living in Kiev in the Soviet Union. In all, we had four winners from outside the USA —an Australian, a Canadian, Sergey, and a Hungarian.

We did one thing different this year. We always include essays of advice to young writers and illustrators; some aspect of the scene which would be useful to novices. But this year, we did not much go to the older generations for this advice. There is an essay from the large collection of extremely good writing advice by L. Ron Hubbard, and there is a crackerjack of an essay by Frank Frazetta — one of the few statements by Frazetta, and I think the best. But for the rest, we got essays from Ray Aldridge, Karen Joy Fowler, Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Dean Wesley Smith, and Dave Wolverton. These are all writers — even Kristine Rusch — who were helped at an early stage in their careers by WOTF, but now have grown in stature to the point where they can, indeed, offer very cogent advice. The fact that I am very proud of them has nothing to do with it.

And that's it. The book is an original paperback in your bookstore, and I think you could very well do a lot worse than to buy it.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Great Work of Time, John Crowley, (Bantam/Spectra, paper, 136pp, $3.99)

JOHN CROWLEY has already dealt with the circularity of time in his extraordinary novel *Aegypt,* but with *Great Work of Time* he proves that he still has much that is powerful and new to say on the subject. As befits a novel whose point is that causality can run in both directions along time's path, *Great Work of Time* is often confusing and self-contradictory, but it is not meaningless to say that its confusion is always clear and its self-contradictions always make perfect sense.

This novella first appeared in Crowley's collection *Novelties,* and in that incarnation won the World Fantasy Award; for many of you, however, this paperback edition may be your first glimpse of the tale. I promise you many delights and mysteries within it. It is almost impossible to speak of beginnings and endings, but I can say that among the centers around which the story moves are:

The assassination of African colonizer Cecil Rhodes at a time when his will leaves his vast fortune to a secret society whose purpose is to protect the British Empire's view of Right;

The discovery of time travel and the utter unpredictability of the consequences of changing the past (an old theme in science fiction, yes, but no old theme stays old in Crowley's hands);

The sad old yearning of the class-ridden British to belong to something strong and fine, to be part of a true aristocracy.

Indeed, one of the things that will strike American readers most sharply in this book is the utter unimportance of the United States in this tale. Science fiction has long reassured us that even in futures in which America is shown in decline, it is still important to *discuss* that decline, and the sense of loss is painful indeed; but in *Great Work of Time,* North America is barely worth mentioning. Amid all its other strangeness, this may seem to

some to be the strangest thing of all. Not that Crowley *ignores* America — indeed, he begins by saying he will speak "in an American sort of voice (for we are all Americans now, aren't we?)." But every event and attitude in the story from then on denies that bitter declaration. It is a song of the old Empire that Crowley is singing, and he feels no obligation to shudder visibly at the thought of imperialism even as he spells out exactly why any British empire was doomed (and yet glorious) from the start, thus making this slim volume a peculiar sort of Decline and Fall.

Mind of My Mind, Octavia Butler (Gollancz, paper, 221pp, £3.99); *Patternmaster* (Avon, paper, 160pp, out of print); *Survivor* (Signet, paper, 187pp, out of print)

It's odd, I know, to review novels that are out of print or available only in British editions. But Octavia Butler is far too important a novelist — and these books are far too powerful — to be languishing out of print in the United States.

While it's true that her Xenogenesis books (*Dawn, Adulthood Rites, Imago*) are more satisfying as hard science fiction, and show how much power her storytelling has gained in the years of her career, the fact remains that these are wonderful, inventive novels that deserve to be read. They are even worth hunting down from mail-order and specialty stores until such time as a U.S. publisher gets on the stick and reissues them.

Those of you who have read *Wild Seed,* Butler's brilliant novel about Doro, the immortal who lives through the centuries by leaping from body to body as each one dies, and Emma, the shape-changing woman who learns to accommodate him and still find a measure of freedom and respect under his rule, know exactly what Butler is able to do with the "psi" theme that is so easily overdone. Indeed, from the copyright dates on the other novels in this series, one can suppose that she developed this future history during the late sixties or early seventies, when Zenna Henderson and other writers had brought psi stories to a position of temporary dominance in the field, rather the way that cyberpunk brought us a temporary oversupply of stories about computer-brain interfaces and criminal jet-sets.

But because she is Octavia Butler, her psi stories — even the earliest of them — have something special. In many ways, *Patternmaster,* which is the earliest of the Wild Seed books in copyright and the latest in storyline, is more magic romance than hard science

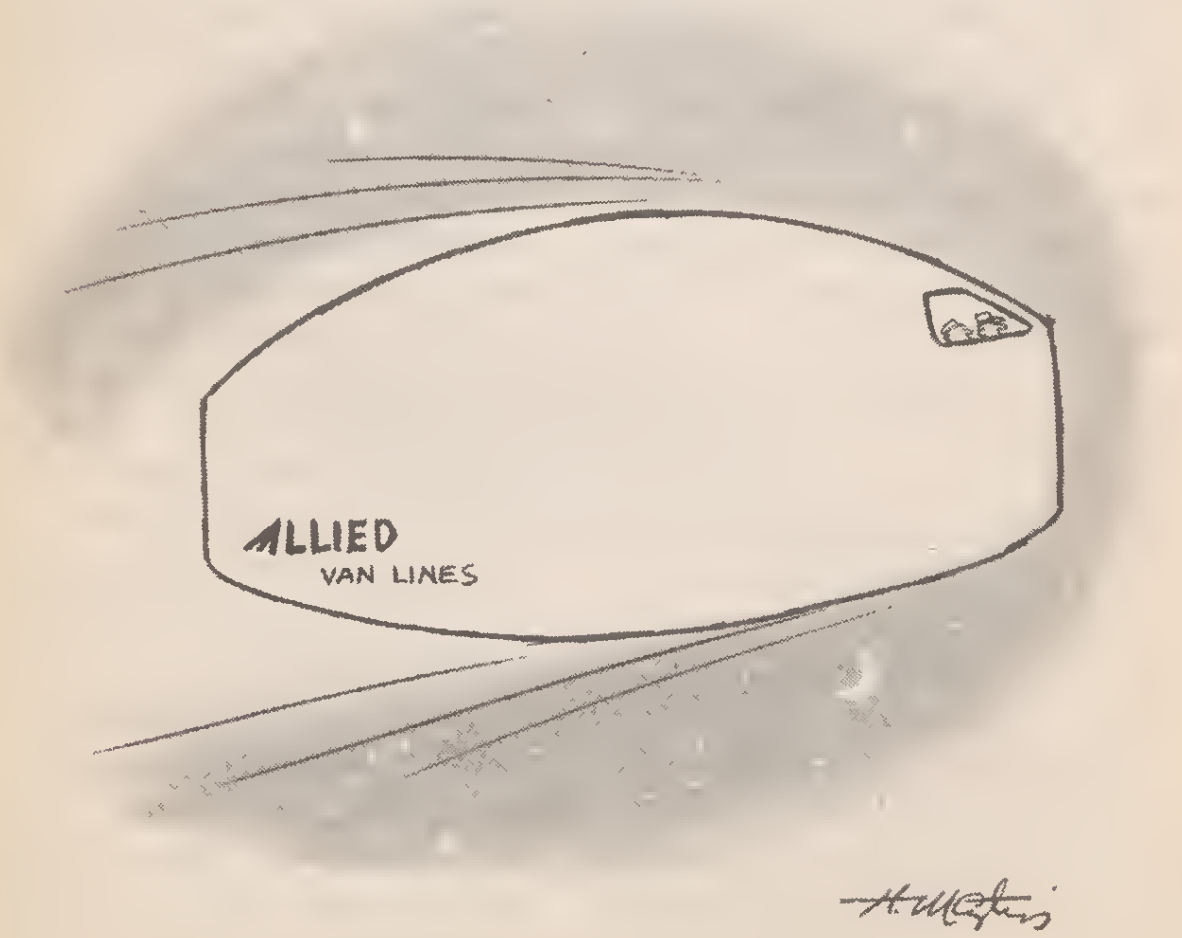
fiction, as she follows the younger son of the Patternmaster on his quest to win free of his vicious older brother as he positions himself to succeed their father in control of the network of psionically gifted masters of the civilized world. Yet even in this early novel we can see Butler's keen sense of truth at work, making characters more real than they ever needed to be for this sort of tale. More important, we already can see her touching on the issues of freedom and slavery, power and responsibility that have made all her writings such vibrant studies of the ethics of power and submission. Butler understands as so few other writers do (least of all the libertarians) that some freedom must always be surrendered in order to retain any power to act at all. Her characters are faced with devastatingly difficult choices, and often take the less honorable but more practical choice of surviving in a world where they cannot act on their real preferences.

Survivor is another early work, in some ways only peripherally connected to *Patternmaster* and *Wild Seed*, but again dealing with a character who has to surrender some of her personal choices in order to stay alive long enough to have hope of a final victory. An outcast, she is taken in by missionaries who are leaving an Earth ravaged by war between psis and "clayarks." On another planet they are determined to maintain the purity of the human species, but instead find themselves being used as tools in a struggle between two rival bands of aliens. Only Alanna realizes that they have chosen the wrong side in this struggle, and will surely be destroyed.

Mind of My Mind is the immediate sequel to *Wild Seed*, and for those of us who loved that story (I even used it as my example of how science fiction exposition is handled in my book on writing sf and fantasy), it is a *very* satisfying continuation, though I was devastated at the rather callous way she concluded the final struggle between Doro and Mary, the first Patternmaster, and was also disappointed at how little use Butler made of Emma, whom I truly came to love in *Wild Seed*. But those are standard sequel-quibbles — that the author was too heartless with characters who loomed so large in earlier books! The new characters in *Mind of My Mind* are just as alive as any in *Wild Seed*, and Butler's exploration of people who are used to power and suddenly find themselves under someone else's control is clear-headed and brutally unsentimental. As always in Butler's best work, we're never quite sure whom to root for, for

when it comes to power, no one who has it is pure, and yet it is easy to lose sympathy or interest in those who *lack* it. You are never quite sure where Butler herself stands on any of these moral issues, as she keeps subverting every moral position you suspect she has taken, until you finally realize that she has no "position" at all, except to observe: This is how power works, and how decent people *try* to control it, and how inevitably they fall short of their aspirations.

I look forward to hearing of all these books' being back in print. If you haven't read Butler, you don't yet understand how rich the possibilities of science fiction can be. And the more you read her work, the better you understand how science fiction is the genre of literature *best* suited to teach us about the real world.



THE NITTY GRITTY OF SPACE SETTLEMENT

Since her last appearance in this magazine ("Claim Jumpin' Woman You Got a Stake in My Heart," July 1991), Esther won the 1991 Hugo Committee's Announcers Are Glad It Didn't Make It Award with "The Curse of Psamlahkithotep" also late of this magazine. Her novels Harpy High *and* Unicorn U *have appeared from Ace Books, completing the humorous fantasy trilogy begun in* Gnome Man's Land. *She has also had time to write short stories like this one, which will also appear in the Greg Benford/Martin H. Greenberg anthology* Alternate Americas, *to be published by Bantam Books sometime in 1992.*

Such A Deal

By Esther M. Friesner

HISDAI IBN EZRA, noted merchant of Granada (retired), did his best to conceal his amusement when his servant entered and announced, "There—there is a vis—a visitor to see you, *sidi.* A—a Castilian, he said to tell you."

How you twist your face and stammer, Mahmoud! the old Jew thought. *You are jumpy as a flea-ridden monkey. This unexpected guest of mine has you at a loss, I see. Well, you are young yet, and it is no common thing for foreigners to frequent this house since I left the trader's calling. I still recall what a hubbub we had when the Genoese navigator first arrived, and that was supposed to be a secret visit. Lord of Hosts, whatever had become of that one? And of Daud. . . .* He banished the thought, dreading the despair it

must bring him. Better to study Mahmoud's confusion and hold back laughter instead of tears.

Mahmoud was obviously waiting for his master to summon guards or send word to Sultan Muhammad's palace of the infidel interloper's presence. When Hisdai did neither — only turning another leaf in his Maimonides — the servant seemed ready to jig out of his skin. The old Jew swallowed a chuckle. *You look as if you could do with a little reading from the* Guide to the Perplexed *yourself, boy. You did not expect this, did you? One of those cause-mad Christians in the house of a Jew who lives quite comfortably under the reign of an Islamic lord? Least of all when the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella are camped before our walls, laying siege to Granada. No, you have every right to wear that astonished expression. If only it were not so comical!*

Aloud, he sighed and, setting aside his book, asked, "Are there any refreshments in this house worthy of so exalted a caller, Mahmoud? A little spiced wine? A handful of dates not too wizened? Some other delicacies that Cook may have secreted away from happier times, may the Lord bless him for the prudent ant he so wisely emulates?"

Mahmoud knit his brows, his bewilderment mounting visibly. "Come, lad!" Hisdai said, trying to hearten his servant into action. "There is no mystery here. For me to expect Cook to have secret stores of exotic tidbits despite the passage of nearly a year and a half since the Christians have come before our gates — that is just my knowing Cook's character."

"Oh, it is not that, *sidi*; it is only —" Mahmoud paused, his tongue caught in a snare set by his discretion.

"Only what?" Hisdai ibn Ezra could not restrain a mildly cynical smile. "Fear nothing; I have heard all the whispering my servants do about me for more years than you have been alive." He stroked his silvery beard. "They call me master merchant to my face, but behind my back I vow that more than one idle tongue wags that I have trafficked less with human clientele and more with *jinn* and *Iblis*. Is this not so?"

Very reluctantly, Mahmoud nodded. Hisdai laughed. "Therefore, why stand amazed at our unheralded visitor? Give thanks that he merely comes from our enemies' ranks and not from the fiery Pit itself!"

Mahmoud made it his business to say, "O *sidi*, I do not believe the tales. How can I, who behold you daily, give credence to such lies?"

Hisdai lifted one gray and shaggy brow. "Are you quite certain they *are*

lies, Mahmoud?" he teased.

Like most new servants, Mahmoud took everything his master said at face value. "They must be lies, O *sidi*. For one thing, you do not even look like a wizard."

The boy spoke truth, and Hisdai ibn Ezra knew it. If he flattered himself that he resembed the dark magicians of legend, any good mirror would disabuse him at once. He knew himself to be a small, crinkle-faced cricket chirp of a man. White hairs — sparse beneath his turban, lush upon his chin — held constant argument with brown eyes of a youthful sparkle. Long hours of study of the driest and most petrified of scholarly subjects that drifted off into longer hours of heavy-headed sleep painted him old. Then he would wake and speak with such lively insight and interest of current affairs near and far that he left younger men panting to follow the lightning path of his wit and insight.

True that Paradox had long made her scruffy nest beneath the roof of the onetime merchant prince, but for a Castilian to come a-calling in these times —! That was too much for even the most seasoned of servants to bear without dashing away at once to auction off the news to his comrades' eager ears. Now that Mahmoud's initial startlement had faded, Hisdai could see that he was avid to have his duty done and be whisking this tale with him to the kitchens, and so the old Jew gently urged him on his way, saying, "Go now, haste. It does not do to keep demons or Castilians waiting."

Mahmoud departed. He returned not much later, followed by a gentleman whose decidedly simple European clothes were in startling contrast to the splendor of Hisdai ibn Ezra's flowing Moorish robes.

"Pelayo Fernández de Santa Fe, O *sidi*," Mahmoud announced, bowing. Hisdai recognized that the lad was a skilled enough servitor to lower his eyes to the very stones while still observing absolutely everything around him. This time, as others, that talent would provide Mahmoud with a most instructive spectacle.

Then Hisdai ibn Ezra gazed from the clothes before him to the face above — and turned to a lump of ice as solid as any to be found on the summit of snowcapped Mulhacén. He felt the color ebb from his face like a fleeing tide, felt for the first time the palsy of age cause his outstretched hands to tremble. The old man's breath rushed into his lungs with an audible rasping, a sound too near the final deathbed croak for any servant

who valued his pay to remain unmoved.

Yet when Mahmoud rushed forward, a wail of paid loyalty on his lips, the strength gushed back into Hisdai's body. He stood straight as a poplar and sharply motioned Mahmoud away. "Unworthy servant, where are your manners? Our honored guest will think himself to be still among his own barbarous people. Go, fetch scented water and soft towels! Bread and salt! My finest wine! Why are you gawking? You'll gape less when one of King Ferdinand's men drives a pike through your gizzard. Go, I say!"

Mahmoud did not wait for further instructions. He had more than enough meat for meditation, and the other servants would treat him royally for it. Any diversion not connected with the infernal siege was worth its weight in gold, especially to folk who lacked anything more precious than copper. Hisdai ibn Ezra watched Mahmoud scamper off, listening until he judged his servant's pattering footsteps had retreated a sufficient distance for his liking. Then and only then did he turn to give his visitor a proper welcome.

"You *idiot*!" He snatched the man's hat from his hands and flung it out the window, into the courtyard below.

The visitor flew after his hat, but wisely halted his own flight short of the abyss. Leaning over the tiled sill, he remarked, "I see that you've kept the false awning in place down there. I thought that since you retired, you wouldn't need to maintain such emergency measures in case of dissatisfied royal customers."

"I may not deal with Sultan Muhammed anymore, nor need to provide for the possibility of — ahem! — expeditious departures, but only a fool dreams any peace is permanent," Hisdai growled. "Most definitely not in these times."

His guest was unmoved by the old man's peevishness. He was still admiring Hisdai's escape stratagem, with which he seemed to be disconcertingly familiar. "To be able to jump from this height and land safely—! Ah, one day I must try it, just to see how it feels. Unfortunately, my hat missed the awning and the cushions under it and landed right in the fishpond. Was that necessary? I was rather attached to that hat."

"Would that your brain were as attached to the inside of your skull! Do you realize what you risked, coming here in the teeth of a siege like this?"

"Unless I misremember," Hisdai's guest drawled, "it was not ten months ago that I found you entertaining a certain Genoese in this very

room. When I asked you how Master Columbus had managed to breach the siege, you only smiled and said, *I have my ways. One key opens many gates, if that key be made of gold.*" He winked at Hisdai. "For once, I recalled your wisdom and used it well, particularly now that I have more of your precious keys than any locksmith."

"What is this blather of keys?" Hisdai snorted. "When Mahmoud informed me that there was a Castilian come calling — all Christians are Castilians to him — I expected to greet a common seaman bringing word from the Admiral. That Genoese is no fool. He has more sense than to venture his neck for nothing!"

The young man murmured into his beard, "There you speak a greater truth than you know."

His words went unheard. As suddenly as it had erupted, Hisdai's burst of sour temper vanished altogether. He rushed to fling the silken wings of his sleeves around the "Castilian." Ah, Daud! Daud, my son, it is I who am the fool! If you are back, what else matters? My Daud — or shall I call you by that abominable Castilian name you bestowed upon yourself?"

Daud pretended to take umbrage. "I thought it a very good alias, and most handy for getting past the more officious of the Catholic Monarchs' sentries. Stop a man named for *don* Pelayo, he who began the Reconquest of this land from the Moors? Most ill-omened at this juncture." He shook his head solemnly. "Now that Ferdinand and Isabella are about to retake the last Iberian foothold of our Moorish rulers, that would be most ill-omened indeed."

Hisdai beamed over his son's resourcefulness. "Still the clever rogue, my pride! Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for bringing me to this season. My heart, my child, I never thought to see your face again."

The young man laughed out of a face that was a less wrinkled version of his sire's. His beard was somewhat shorter, the hair on his head summer midnight to Hisdai's winter dawn, but the eyes held the same fire. "Indeed, my father, there were moments in the voyage when I myself questioned whether the next face I saw would be yours or Elijah's!" He sighed. "May Heaven witness, our valiant Admiral suffered celestial visions enough for us all. There must be truth in what they say, that madness is but a divinely given spark of genius that burns with a most peculiar flame. That man has a sufficiency of such embers to burn all *al-Andalus* to ashes." Laughter departed his lips as he added: "As he may yet do."

"What is this you say, my son?" Hisdai clapped his hands to his eldest's shoulders. "Do you mean that the voyage was — a failure? The homeland we seek, the refuge for our people once these accursed Catholic Monarchs destroy Granada, is only another of the Admiral's insane fancies?"

Daud's travel-tattered mustache twisted itself into a wry expression. "O my father, if I hear *you* call the Admiral mad, you'll have me thinking there's some truth to Mother's allegations. Why else would you commend me to a madman's care?"

Hisdai waved off his son's words impatiently. "Your mother, foremost of my wives, is a virtuous woman. As such, her price is above rubies, even if her love of gossip is beneath contempt. You are my heir, Daud! Would I entrust a diamond of untold price to a lunatic? But if the diamond is yet rough, I would select with utmost care the jeweler into whose hands I place it for proper cutting, polishing, setting, until the every refinement of his art had perfected it as it deserves to be."

"In other words, you sent me to fall off the edge of the earth for my own good," Daud concluded.

"Also to get you away from that Egyptian dancing girl your worthless friend Barak spends all his money on," Hisdai grumbled under his breath.

Daud heard, and did his best not to choke on laughter. "Fear not, O my father! We encountered no such temptresses in the court of the Great Khan. As is well known, the almighty monarch of Cathay surrounds himself exclusively with the fairest daughters of Israel, the flowers of Judaea, the untouched virgins of Jerusalem-in-exile, the—"

"Is it so much for an old man to want his son wed to a nice Jewish girl?" Hisdai sulked into his beard.

"Ah, Father, you would not be satisfied until I wed a veritable princess!"

"And is that such a bad ambition?" Hisdai demanded.

"Not at all, not at all." Daud gazed at his father with real affection. "So it was my taste for forbidden delights that counted as one more rough spot for your Genoese jeweler to strike off? And here I thought it was the dream of establishing a new homeland for our people that drove you to pour my patrimony into those three rachitic ships you bought him."

Hisdai ibn Ezra was in no joking mood. "Daud, I see that at least one of my dreams has been in vain. You return as much the mocker as you departed."

"Oh no, my father." Daud dropped all pretense of jest. "Believe me, I return to your house a changed man. If I banter with you now, it is only to keep my heart from crumbling beneath the full weight of what I have to tell you."

Fear and consternation showed themselves boldly in the old Jew's eyes. "What news, then? Tell me! Not that the voyage failed, no, or else you could not be here, solid flesh beneath my hands. What, then? The Great Khan denied our petition, rejected my gifts? Once, there were many Jews in Cathay, respected, honored, permitted to dwell in peace, to follow the ways of our fathers. Did you remind the Great Khan of the prosperity we brought the land?"

Daud nodded. "I tried. Our translator did, at any rate. Moshe ibn Ahijah is a wonderful scholar. No one was more surprised than he when the Great Khan did not know Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Castilian, Greek, or Latin."

"But surely you managed to communicate? By signs? By a show of gifts? In my day, when I accompanied the caravans, I always managed to make my intents clear—"

"We, too, managed. The gifts you sent to the Great Khan," Daud replied, "were very eloquent. Entertaining, I should say. They made him laugh."

"Laugh! At masterpieces of the goldsmith's art? Gems that were the finest I could call in from our peopel here in *al-Andalus,* in *Castilla,* in France, in Italy, even across the water in *Mamlakah al-Maghribiyah*—!" Hisdai began to pace the room. "When word first reached me of this man Columbus, I thought it to be the answer to my wildest prayers. Any half-educated man knows that the ancients proved the world to be round — that much of the Genoese's fancies needed no confirmation — but to apply that knowledge to the establishment of a westerly trade route—!" He smacked a fist into his palm. "That was the prize I desired. A way for us, for all Jews, to reach the haven of the East safely, there to live unmolested by the periodic accesses of zeal that afflict our Christian neighbors. Once there, we would prosper as never before."

"So you said, my father." Daud remained glum.

"So I said, and so it would be! The East has ever favored us, and with new trade routes opened, we would thrive. Oh Daud, you will never know how fervently I thanked the Lord when those purblind Catholic Monarchs rejected Columbus's plan and sent him packing! You cannot begin to

imagine all I did, or how speedily, to bring him here so that I might finance his scheme, and our future!"

"I recall it well. I did not spend *all* my time mooning over Barak's dancing girl."

In his distracted state, Hisdai disregarded Daud's mordant comments. "My son, the treasure I sent with you was to be the ransom of the Jews, our payment for refuge in the lands of the distant East once that vainglorious Genoese proved a safe sea route there possible. And you say the Great Khan *laughed*?"

In silence, Daud reached into the large leather pouch at his side. His fist emerged overflowing with the glitter of pure gold and priceless jewels. Chains and pendants, adornments for ears, breast, wrist, and ankle, gorgeous enhancements for body parts beyond the old man's imagining —all spilled over the blue-and-green carpet. While Hisdai gaped, Daud simply plunged his hand back into the pouch and followed the first handful of gold with a second, then a third, then a fourth, each scattered with the disinterested prodigality of a rich man tossing crumbs to the birds.

"You see now why he laughed? Because next to the treasure hoard the Great Khan already commands, our gifts were regarded as no better than the pinched clay figurine one of his children might make for him for a present: charming, but hardly to be taken seriously. What you behold is merely my share of the first gift the Great Khan made to us. The *first*, mark me. It was a reward."

"A—reward?" Hisdai managed to wrench his gaze away from the heap of wealth strewn so casually at his feet. "What for?"

"For making the Admiral shut up about Christ." Daud shrugged. "His harangues were putting the Great Khan's priests off their stride, and they had such a lot of people to — to serve that day." An unpleasant memory appeared to grip him. Fine sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Christ?" Hisdai echoed, overlooking his son's discomfort. "But I thought he was over all that."

"My father, one does not *get over* one's faith as one does a fever," Daud commented tartly.

"Bah! Christianity was never truly the Admiral's faith. It was a—a convenience, the path that seemed to him smoothest for getting on in the world, particularly as he desired royal backing for this unheard-of voyage

of his." Hisdai spoke as one who knows such things too surely to debate them.

"You may be right," Daud admitted. "In all our time on board the *Tziporah*, I often thought that the Admiral gave his prayers to God, but his worship to himself."

"Of course I am right!" Hisdai snapped. "Christian just for show, he was, and to gain the ear of the powerful. Much good it did him! He had so many royal doors slammed in his face that he had the arms of *Castilla, León y Aragón* impressed on his forehead."

He began to pace the floor, kicking aside the golden baubles. "He came to me fresh from long and profitless waiting upon Ferdinand and Isabella. In my presence, he no longer needed to play the pious Catholic. He told me that his own folk back in Genoa were our kindred — as if I had not already secured that knowledge before sending for him! — exiles from the Christian kingdoms of Spain. I did not have to tell him what our fate would be if Granada falls. Ah, my son, if you could have but heard how wistfully he spoke of the faith of his ancestors!"

"Was this before or after you offered him the money for his expedition?" Daud's question was dust-dry.

"Now you say he preached Christ in the Great Khan's court?" Hisdai ibn Ezra wrung his hands. "Alas, what was he thinking of?"

"Probably the same thing he is acting on even now." Without warning, Daud seized Hisdai by the shoulders, fixing him with a terrible, burning glance. "Father, cease your wailing and pay heed. Your Genoese friend may be a visionary, but he could give the Evil One lessons in opportunism. Christopher Columbus has returned with two of your three ships intact. The *Tziporah* he ran aground off the coast of Cathay before we began our homeward sail. The *Bat-sheba* we brought safely to harbor in Tangier, where its—ah—cargo is presently being sent after me by our family connections in *Mamlakah al-Maghribiyah*, and as for the third—"

"Cargo?" Hisdai interrupted, the keen professional interest of a seasoned merchant lighting up his eyes.

"*Listen* to me, I said!" Daud came dangerously close to shaking his father soundly. "As for the *third* ship, the *Hadassah ha-Malkah*, as soon as we came within sight of Tangier, your precious Admiral ordered it to veer away north. Yes—do not stare—I said north; north to the ports of the Catholic Monarchs! North with a hold filled with the later gifts of the

Great Khan, beside which what you see upon the carpet here is nothing. And even now, as we speak, he had gone to present himself before Ferdinand and Isabella at their battle camp at Santa Fe. Don't you see? Now he has proof that will command the attention of royalty in a manner they cannot ignore. The paltry gold of Granada's Jews was insufficient to buy us refuge from the Castilian troops, or safety for the last city where our Moorish masters allowed us to follow our faith in peace. The endless gold of Cathay *will* buy your pet Genoese what he has always hungered for — a noble title, royal patronage, and his place as the honored favorite of our enemies!" His face was a mask of scorn as he added, "Once a snob, always a snob."

"But we must stop him!" Hisdai grabbed his son's arms in a grip that was the equal of the younger man's.

"Do you think we did not try, O my father? Too late. By the time we realized what he was about, he had gained too much time. After the wreck of the *Tziporah*, he made certain to crew the *Hadassah ha-Malkah* with men who would go along with his treachery."

"Impossible." Hisdai shook his head like one suddenly weary. "Everyone aboard those ships was of our own people. They knew our great purpose! How could they—?"

"Present promises of a greater share in a hold full of treasure weighs more with some men than dreams of a distant Jewish homeland," Daud said with neither pride nor shame.

Hisdai slumped in his son's grasp. "Even so. How can I blame them? The siege has lasted almost a year and a half. Granada is all that remains to our sultan." With faltering steps, he turned from Daud and went to the window. "In the streets, he is no longer called Abu Abd Allah Muhammad, but *al-zogoybi*; and in truth, he is a poor devil. He will go down, and we shall fall with him. The taking of Granada is the death of our people's last truly safe haven. In the dark times to come, many will fancy gold a better rock to cling to than Torah."

So rapt was Hisdai by his burden of hopelessness, he hardly noticed that when his son's shadow crept up behind him, a second shade—then a third, then a fourth—glided silently into the room and joined it. He only half-heard Daud say, "O my father, you are wise to have kept faith."

"Faith?" Hisdai's laugh was brittle and hollow. He continued to gaze up at the steel-bright sky above Granada. "Of what use is faith? I have

squandered our wealth to back the vision of a renegade! We need soldiers, Daud — not scholars, not visionaries — and soldiers will not fight for faith alone."

"Yet I hear these Catholic Monarchs call this battle for Granada a new Crusade."

"That shows all you know of Crusades, my son. If Granada were a poor mud-hut village, these Catholic Monarchs and their minions would not care if we worshiped the birds of the air or the snakes that crawl over the face of the earth, but because we have wealth—"

"Father," Daud cautioned. "Father, it would be wiser not to speak with mockery of snakes and birds."

"I mean no scorn. Who am I to mock the Lord's creation?" Hisdai leaned heavily against the side of the window. "I am just a poor old man who put his faith in dreams. Dreams fly. Only death is certain."

Then Hisdai ibn Ezra turned from the window, and in that instant beheld a sight that convinced him that madness, too, is one of life's little certainties. "Blessed Lord," he murmured, and took one backward step that came near to toppling him out the window.

Daud sprang forward and seized Hisdai by the arm. "Have a care, O my father. It is not courtesy to leave your faithful so precipitously."

"Faithful?" Hisdai quavered.

"Well, so he has assured me. Although offically he is a priest of Huitzilopochtli, he has confided in me that his heart" — for some reason, Daud swallowed hard—" his heart is devoted to the worship of Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent. Uh . . . would you mind if he touched your beard? It would be an honor, and he has promised us so much —"

Giddy with trying to make sense of the gibberish Daud was spouting, Hisdai found himself face-to-face with a man unlike any he had ever encountered, even in the years of his widest merchantile wanderings. Straight black hair, deep copper skin marked with tattoos and other scars, wide nose ornamented with plugs of gold and jade, the apparition regarded him with an unreadable expression.

"He wants to . . . touch my beard?" Hisdai could not tear his eyes away. From the gilded and gemmed sandals on this creature's feet, to the exquisite feathered mantle on his shoulders, to the gorgeously plumed headdress crowning all, one thing about the new caller was certain: not even Mahmoud would mistake him or the two burly fellows accompanying

him for Castilians.

As if to confirm this, Mahmoud chose that moment to enter with the refreshments, a dish that was tribute both to Cook's frugality and creativity. "Remember to tell *ya-sidi* Hisdai that the meat is for the Castilian only," he mumbled to himself, so intent on keeping the heavy tray level that at first he did not really notice the extra people now gathered in the room. "Remember to tell him, or Cook will have my head. Master is—*was*—so fond of Rover."

This apposite consumer warning now went flying out of Mahmoud's skull as he looked up from his burden and actually *saw* his master's additional guests. One wore what looked like a leopard's pelt, the head a fanged helmet; the other was sheathed in feathered armor with an eagle's beak overshadowing his keen eyes. Both were heavily armed with eccentric weapons that looked none the less mortally effective for all their strangeness.

Mahmoud screamed, dropped the canine *khus-khus*, and ran. The eagle-helmed warrior threw what looked like a primitive ax, which nailed the fleeing servant's sleeve to the doorpost. Before Mahmoud could wrench free, he was laid hold of by both bizarrely armored men and thrust to the floor at Hisdai's feet, as if for the older man's approval.

Daud stepped in at once. "O my father," he said smoothly, "May it please you to welcome the beloved nephew of the Great Khan Ahuitzotl, the lord Montezuma?"

Without a word or hint of their intentions, the three copper-skinned strangers fell to the carpet alongside Mahmoud and assumed positions of the utmost humble submission. Hisdai opened and closed his mouth, wet his lips numerous times, nibbled the ends of his snowy mustache, and in general made every visual preamble to speech without actually managing to utter an intelligible word. He looked as if he did not know whether to object to the display of obeisance at his feet, to demand an explanation, to offer the abused Mahmoud a raise in salary, or just to go to the window, leap for the padded awning below, and make a break for it. There was also the chance that he might miss the awning, but at the moment that did not seem like such a bad alternative to the irrationality besetting him. At the end of his reason, he searched his son's face and ultimately managed to choke out a hoarse yet eloquent plea:

"*Nu*?"

Daud looked sheepish. "Ah yes, there was one *small* matter I forgot to mention about my new friend, o my father."

He reached once more into his pouch and pulled out a rolled parchment on which was a meticulously copied drawing of a venerable-looking gentleman — bearded, fair-skinned—whose preferred mode of transport was obviously a raft made out of live snakes. "I made the drawing myself, copying it from one of Lord Ahuitzotl's holiest manuscripts," he said, showing it to Hisdai. "This is Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent, the god who departed, sailing away to the East, but whose return has been foretold. Specifically foretold. Promised, I should say, for a few years from now. Of course, as I told Lord Montezuma, who are we to quibble if a god shows up for his appointments a trifle early?" He tilted the page so the light might fall on it from a better angle, and hopefully prompted his father, "You *do* see the resemblance?"

Hisdai's reaction to this unsought Annunication would remain one of Time's unfinished mysteries. From somewhere beyond the walls, a long, blood-chilling ululation shivered the air and tore all attention from every matter save itself. It was a scream beautiful in its ghastly perfection. Not even the most ignorant of hearers could confound a sound that horripilating with the muezzin's common cry; not unless the muezzin had suddenly been seized with the urge to boil himself alive slowly, in a vat of vengeance-minded lobsters.

At the fearful outcry, the primal instincts of every man in that small room asserted themselves. Mahmoud tendered his resignation and bolted. Hisdai clutched his grown son protectively to him as if Daud were still a child. Montezuma and his entourage calmly lifted their heads and smiled: quaint, nostalgic smiles such as other folk might wear on hearing a dear, old familiar cradle tune.

"Oh good," said Daud. The model of unflappability, he disengaged himself from his father's arms and brought a stub of charcoal and a much-folded document out his shirt-bosom. The blood of generations of steel-nerved merchant princes never flowed more coolly through his veins as he consulted the parchment, checked off an item, and remarked to all concerned, "I see the rest of the cargo has arrived."

On the battleground before Granada, the troops of the Catholic Monarchs knew that already.

In spite of Hisdai's protests that he had no place on the field of combat,

his son Daud and his newfound retainers insisted that he accompany them to the city gate to view the proceedings. Shock did little to diffuse Hisdai's innate stubbornness, and he put teeth in his refusal by making that long-contemplated leap out the window.

To no avail. There were more of the eagle-helmed Cathayans in the patio below, the translator Moshe ibn Ahijah with them. They simply waited until he stopped bouncing, then (with ibn Ahijah's able intervention) hailed him as Lord Quetzalcoatl, All-Powerful Sovereign, Savior-Whose-Coming-Was-Foretold-For-A-Few-Years-Later-Than-This-But-Who's-Counting?, and hauled him off to see how well his loyal people served him.

So it was that Hisdai ibn Ezra came to witness the end of the siege of Granada, and the grim finale to all the Catholic Monarchs' dreams of finishing the Reconquest. Instead, the Reconquest finished them. As he stood upon the battlements of the city, Hisdai beheld a vast force of Cathayans sweep through the Christian ranks with astonishing zeal and ferocity.

"Incredible," he remarked to Daud. "And yet they make such delicate procelains."

"I just hope Lord Tizoc and those jaguar knights of his find you a throne quickly," Daud replied, not really listening. "This is going to be over sooner than I thought."

"And why should I need a throne?" Hisdai inquired.

"Why, to receive the captives!"

"Captives?" The old Jew made a deprecating sound.

Twenty minutes later he was making it out of the other side of his mouth as he gazed down at his noble prisoners and felt distinctly uncomfortable. It was not the fault of his seat — the throne was the best Lord Tizoc's men could transport from the great Alhambra palace on such short notice — but of Hisdai ibn Ezra's new position. During his few previous interviews with royalty, he had been firmly entrenched on the giving end of any and all obeisances, grovels, and general gestures of submission. This was different, and would take some getting used to.

Not all of the captives were making the transition any easier for the former merchant. Queen Isabella of *Castilla y León* was the only woman who could kneel in the dirt at the foot of a god's throne and still make it look as if everyone present had come to pay homage to her. Her husband and consort, Ferdinand of *Aragón*, crouched beside her, eyes hermetically

shut, whimpering, any pretense of royal pride long since abandoned. Unlike his mate, he had been in the thick of the last battle and had seen too many sights that properly belonged in a sinner's nightmare of Hell.

Ferdinand and Isabella were not alone. Sultan Muhammad and his mother were with them, the regal quartet linked at the necks with a single rope whose end was fast in the hand of Montezuma's finest jaguar warrior.

Off to one side, Christopher Columbus crouched within a ring of eagle knights — the "cargo" of that ship he had abandoned because he thought a shipment of gold had the greater worth than a shipment of heathen ambassadors. The error of his commercial instincts had just been proven beyond doubt on the battlefield.

Using care so as not to upset the towering headdress his new subjects had insisted he wear, Lord Hisdai ibn Ezra y Quetzalcoatl beckoned Daud nearer. "This is wrong," he whispered.

"Try it for a time; you may like it," Daud suggested.

"But this is blasphemy!" Hisdai maintained, pounding on the arm of his throne. "*Thou shalt have no other gods before me,* says the Lord!"

"Well, *you* have no other gods before Him, do you, Father? And if your new subjects choose to worship a Jew, they won't be the first. Given time, they might even convert entirely. *If Judaism is good enough for your lord Quetzalcoatl,* I will tell them, *it should be good enough for you!* It won't take long. Moshe ibn Ahijah had to explain to them about horses only *once* when we reached Tangier, and you saw how well they handled the Castilian cavalry."

"Yes, but to *eat* the poor beasts afterward—!"

"Well, they do have their little ways. . . ."

Hisdai considered this. Unfortunately, his meditations were interrupted by Queen Isabella, who decided to make her royal displeasure known by spitting at his feet and calling him a name that showed her deep ignorance of Jewish family life. Two of the jaguar warriors sprang forward to treat her sacrilege by a method whose directness would have warmed the figurative heart of the Inquisition. Only a horrified shout from Hisdai made them lower their obsidian-toothed war clubs, still sticky with assorted bits of skull bone and brain matter collected in the course of the recent fray.

Montezuma himself came before his chosen lord, bowing low. "O august Lord Quetzalcoatl, mighty Plumed Serpent, bringer of the arts of peace, what is your will that we do with the graceless devils who dared

attack your chosen stronghold and those who so poorly defended it until now?" His bastard blend of Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Castilian, Greek, and Latin was really quite good for one who had only picked up snatches of the tongues on board a sailing vessel.

"He means the kings," Daud whispered. "Both Catholic and Moorish. And Granada."

"I know who and what he means," Hisdai snapped back sotto voce. "I still don't know why he has to mean me, with all those barbarous names. What have I to do with kings, anyway?"

"Well, you'll have to do *something* with them. Your new subjects expect—they expect—" Daud hesitated. Having witnessed the aftermath of more than one battle while visiting the Great Khan Ahuitzotl's court, he knew just what these people expected and how touchy they would be if they didn't get it. On the other hand, there was no way short of a new Creation that his father would consent to what Lord Montezuma had in mind, even in the name of religious freedom.

Daud was pondering this dilemma, when he heard his father exclaim, "Stop pestering me, Montezuma! I tell you I don't know *what* I want done with them! Can't it wait?"

"Puissant lord, it cannot. If we do not feed the sun —"

"What? Feed what? Daud, you speak this man's tongue better than he speaks ours. See if you can understand him. What *is* he trying to say?"

Daud smiled as a second, figurative sun shed the lovely rays of revelation within his mind. "Never mind, Father," he said. "I'll take care of everything. You go ahead to the palace. You know they cannot start the banquet without you."

Reluctant as he was to leave loose ends behind him, Hisdai was still too flummoxed to do other than comply with his son's suggestions. Flanked by jaguar warriors and preceded by eagle knights, he allowed himself to be led up to the splendors of the Alhambra, where the promised victory feast awaited. Word of the bizarre conquest had spread rapidly through the Jewish population of Granada, and mad celebration followed. With the help of Moshe ibn Ahijah's linguistically talented family, Jews, Cathayans, and the always pragmatic Moors had cooperated to lay on a wondrous repast in very little time. Cook was in his glory. There was not an empty goblet nor an occupied kennel left in all the city.

Hisdai had barely taken his place in the feasting hall, when Daud

returned and whispered something in his ear.

"A job?" Hisdai echoed. "That renegade Genoese betrays us and you give him a job?"

"Why not?" Daud made a lazy beckoning gesture, and one of Montezuma's doe-eyed waiting women hastened to fetch a tray of chilled melon slices. As part of the Great Khan's favorite nephew's entourage, these select highborn ladies had been definitively off-limits for the course of the voyage. Now, however, they were just another gift to Lord Quetzalcoatl's household. "You didn't want to be bothered."

Hisdai lowered his eyes. "I feared having my enemies in my power. Nothing reduces a man to his animal nature faster than the opportunity for exacting unlimited revenge."

"Most admirable. Which was precisely why I sent Christopher Columbus to deliver your will to our — I mean, your new subjects."

"My will? How, when I never stated it?"

"Not precisely, perhaps, but I assumed you wished the captives be shown mercy."

"True."

"You just couldn't trust yourself to say as much with Isabella addressing you so — unwisely."

"And shall I trust the Genoese to do as much? The Catholic Monarchs scorned him once. Has he the strength of character to resist paying them back now?"

"Perhaps not." Daud ogled the waiting woman, and she returned a look of most exquisite promise. "Which was why I told him Montezuma has already been advised that the fate of one captive is the fate of all."

Hisdai relaxed visibly. "My son, you are wise. But — you did tell him to request compassionate treatment? You are certain? Does Columbus know enough of the Cathayan tongue to make himself understood beyond doubt?"

Daud sighed. "Alas, no. Christopher Columbus is a man of vision, not linguistics. Which was why I took the precaution of having Moshe ibn Ahijah translate the *exact* words our once-Admiral should relay to Lord Montezuma."

The waiting woman knelt beside him with seductive grace, offering her tray and more besides for Daud's inspection. Rumor had it that she and the others were ranked as princesses in their own land. Idly, Daud

wondered whether — the lady's eventual conversion permitting — such a match would satisfy Hisdai. So caught up was he in these pleasant musings that he did not hear his father's next question.

"Daud! Daud, wake up. I asked you someting."

"Hmm? And what was that, O my fondle — father?"

"What he *said*. What you told the Genoese to *say*."

"Oh, that. I kept it simple. I told him to say —"

From somewhere outside, a loud cheer from many throats assaulted Heaven; loud enough, certainly, to cover the lesser cry of one man surprised by the religious practices of another.

"— have a heart."

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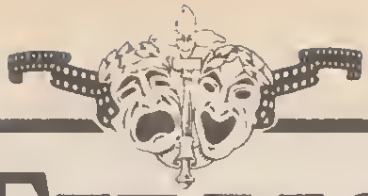
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Installment 47: *In Which Artful Vamping Saves the Publisher $94.98*

YEARS AGO, in this space, I promised to do a long essay on the work and vision of David Cronenberg who seemed to me then, as he seems to me now, the preeminently original directorial intelligence of the past decade. I have not forgotten that promise, though I haven't even *begun* to assemble the stock of inside data, interviews, analyses and brilliant insights I'll need to do an astaire on you. Last time, or perhaps the time before that, I made another promise: a detailed piece on *Edward Scissorhands,* late last year's extraordinary allegorical fantasy from scenarist Caroline Thompson, director Tim Burton, and production designer Bo Welch, with the superlative efforts of thesps Johnny Depp, Winona Ryder, Dianne Wiest, Alan Arkin, *et al.*

I may have been wrong about the Laker's ability to withstand the carpet-bombing of Air Jordan, but I am burned into the face of the Rock of Eternity with my certainty that *Edward Scissorhands* is not just a fantasy classic, but a *cinematic* classic that will become a cultural staple along with *The Wizard of Oz, Fantasia, King Kong, Pinocchio,* and perhaps a handful more that compel and command us by some *recherché* legerdemain, by some lapidary skill that the Muse imparts to one lost soul of our hapless number only when the moon turns blue, by some implausible concatenation of personal loneliness, peer-group ostracism, and other-directed need to prove one's worthiness through special dreaming.

In short, I believe *Edward Scissorhands,* and its director Tim Burton, to be unnatural wonders; and I lust to ramble on about them at sesquipedalian length. Ergo, the promise.

There is but one roadblock to our ramble down that road:

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It's been almost a year since I saw *Edward Scissorhands*, and the voluminous notes I took at the time, written in a *lingua franca* of mine own devising, have become (over the months of exhaustion and inability to do much work) pure gibberish.

So I have to view the film again. And yet again. And (with exquisite joy) perhaps half a dozen times more. I do not think the chore will do other than innervate me, but it *is* the m.o. I employ for painting frescoes this ornate, two coats, matte finish, five year guarantee on parts & labor.

There is but one flaw in that otherwise excellent plan.

The cost of most videocassettes is between twenty and thirty dollars, usually less if you hit one of those shifty outlets where knock-offs of commercial tapes can be purchased. (There is a flourishing market in bootleg tapes, as you no doubt know. Recently, the excellent sf novelist Allen Steele was gracious enough to send me a pair of pirate tapes of *A Boy and His Dog* selling for $9.99 each; he found them in St. Louis video shops. One such emporium was a Suncoast in Crestwood Plaza, the other a Musicland in the St. Louis Galleria. These bogus tapes, in crummy-looking packages, bore such ersatz company names as "New Pacific Pictures" and "Front Row Video." Turns out these are blinds for a pirate videotape factory that has been successfully sued for similar previous infringements. It is their method to set up a labyrinth of diversionary addresses and mail-drops, corporate shells and time-wasting dog-legs that discourage most claimants from pursuing legal remedy. But once in a while someone is sufficiently determined, and when they get caught they are forced to pay up . . . after which, they change their name, change their location to yet another industrial park used for making connections with the video shops that knowingly sell these illegal items, and go right back into business with some new monicker on the packages.

(This is a multi-million dollar scam and, while it may seem nifty to be able to buy *A Boy and His Dog* — or some other excellent film — for a mere $9.99 as opposed to, well, we'll get to that in a moment, what you're getting is a markedly inferior second- or third- or even later-generation duplicate off an already existing prerecorded piece of merchandise. Not to mention that no one who sweated bullets to *make* that film gets a cent from the sale.

(And were it not for guys like Allen Steele — author of such swell novels as ORBITAL DECAY, CLARKE COUNTY, SPACE and the

recently-released LUNAR DESCENT — books so fine that *Booklist* wrote of Steele: "Ingenious . . . an author with the potential to revitalize the Heinlein tradition!" — and don't say I don't know how to repay a favor — if it weren't for hawkshaws like Allen Steele — whatta guy! — poor slobs like your faithful columnist would never even *know* they were being mulcted out of the tiny royalties flowing [or rather, trickling, seeping, dribbling] from work done with the foolish expectation of establishing some sort of annuity against the coming of senility.]

But *Edward Scissorhands* does not sell for twenty or thirty bucks. *Edward Scissorhands*, all one hour and forty minutes of it, is available only on a CBS videocassette for $94.98, a sum I find I cannot, in good conscience, expend in your behalf as long as my poor wife and I are forced to continue plucking, boiling, and eating the tiny birds that knock themselves senseless against the mirrored windows of our modest hovel.

It is common knowledge, of course, that I am paid munificent sums for weaving these word-pictures at fairly regular intervals. Those who have dined with the Missus and me on golden breast of guinea hen and Lachryma Christi, here in the south wing of Chateau Grandeur, off plates of topaz, with pure silver utensils, as the full-time-employed strolling minstrels wander the Great Hall of Gourmandaise, as the distant voices of my *goyishe* serfs can be faintly heard singing their charming native tunes ("Sugar, Sugar" in the original Archies version, "Mellow Yellow," "Stayin' Alive" and "Welcome to the Jungle") as they labor happily in my shekel coffers, shoveling money from one bin to another . . . any such who have seen how The Li'l Woman and I live, here on the glass mountaintop, can easily attest that, yes, the management of this journal stints not in rewarding its faithful columnists.

It is *because* of this largesse, and because I have padded my expense account with the House of Ferman (soon to leave for rulership of the planet Arrakis) that I could not, in fairness, expect good old Ed to shell out the staggering sum of $94.98 merely to afford me the convenience of watching a film sixty-three times. ("Why don't you just rent it for a couple of days?" good old Ed suggested, when I broached the subject.)

Therefore, I have chosen to postpone the long essay on *Edward Scissorhands* for an installment or two, until the tape comes down to a price that does not suck the air from the lungs; and in its place I give you a charming congeries of

oddments and tag-engs, unanswered comments and idle conjecture, bits and pieces and recommendations that have been piling up here for at least a year, in some cases longer, thereby making the data hideously outdated and utterly useless.

Hoping you are the same, I remain vampingly yourn . . .

Late last year, in installment 44, I went on at considerable length passing to my readers my perception of the "horror market" as one that would very quickly vanish as a viable (word used in its proper sense) workplace for writers of fantasy. I did *not*, ever, at any time, suggest that the form of fiction we know as "the horror story" would vanish. I pointed out that there would *always* be a Bram Stoker or Mary Shelley or Dan Simmons or Suzy McKee Charnas who could invest the old bones with new life, but that as a viable (word used *improperly*) category which B. Dalton or Crown Books could ghettoize on one wall between the mysteries and the science fiction, that "horror's" days were numbered. I did the column not only to apprise an alert and intelligent constituency of what I took to be a major trend in film and book publishing, but also to warn as many writers as I could of what I saw to be a very real and hurtling danger to their survival.

A goodly number of writers both known and unknown to me at that time, from both the world of novelists and the realms of screenwriting, called or wrote or personally thanked me for the warning, and said they were acting accordingly.

Unexpectedly, though, a counter-revolutionary sentiment was expressed on those idiot computer bulletin boards, in small press journals, and in industry newspapers, that I was full of crap and oh let's just smile tolerantly because Ellison is at it again! A few small-time agents actually wrote rebuttal articles pointing out that gee, hadn't *they* just sold two novels to this or that paperback house for three or four or five grand just that week. Ms. Lori Perkins was arch and more than a tot condescending in *Mystery Scene*, advising everyone (and her clients in particular) not to panic, that the sky was not falling, and though Ellison was occasionally charming, he was, as usual, full of crap. I didn't view that as particularly responsible or astute behavior on the part of someone pledged to serving the survival of those who had put their careers in her hands, but it wasn't my problem, folks, and I held my silence.

It is now almost a year after installment 44, and today I learned that Lou Aronica at Bantam has killed the Bantam horror line. Not

one or two books, but the entire line. Rick McCammon (in *Publishers Weekly* for August 2nd) gave an interview in which he advised that he would no longer be writing books that could be tagged "horror." His reasons were as complex as his work is excellent, and much of his decision had to do with not being type-cast, but the exit line was nonetheless that "horror" wasn't a place he wished to be any longer. An artist friend of mine in New York (who has asked that I not use her name) called a while back to tell me that she had had three cover paintings for horror novels returned to her, from two different houses, with instructions that she should revise them to look more like psychological suspense novels. The publishers were repositioning books in which they had faith, trying to distance those titles from a genre identification they felt was now nugatory. Warner Bros., Tri-Star, Morgan Creek, and Paramount axed a total of fourteen horror or horror-oriented projects from their "in preparation" schedules, though not a lot of stock can be put in something like that, because three-quarters of *everything* that gets flacked at the beginning of the production season winds up as little more than hot air. Even so . . .

I think (of *course* I do) what I wrote was on the money. I didn't say anything in response to the Ellison's-fulla-crap essays because, as I say, it wasn't my problem. But a year has gone and went, and the facts *seem* to bear out the warning; and so Ms. Perkins's perky poo-poo'ing notwithstanding, I restate my perceptions on this matter as a final gardyloo to writers whose survival seems as important to me as I hope it is to them and those who take 10% off them.

Ted Geisel, known to everyone as Dr. Seuss, died on the night of Tuesday 24-Wednesday 25 September, age 87. AND TO THINK THAT I SAW IT ON MULBERRY STREET and THE 500 HATS OF BARTHOLOMEW CUBBINS were the second and third books I read, as a child roaming the public library in Painesville, Ohio in 1940. His gifts and legacies to the world of fantasy writing, and fantasy films, and fantasy thinking, are incalculable. (What's that? You say you've never seen *The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T*, a gloriously Seussian 1953 film written by himself? How sad for you.) When I turned on the radio for the news as I made my morning coffee, at 5:30 in the dark of the day, and heard he was gone, I found myself weeping like that kid in the Painesville public library. It is possible some of you found yourselves similarly, unexpectedly, doing the

same. And when, later that day, I had occasion to call Bob Silverberg upstate, and reviled the World Fantasy Awards and their like for never having noticed Seuss, Bob put me very much in my place by saying, "He had bestsellers. His name was known to everyone in America and most of the rest of the world. He was loved and his books will live on. Do you think he really missed anything by not being noticed by Those People?"

As usual, Silverberg was sensible and correct. So why do I feel that the award-glutted, award-loopy world of fantasy fans & pros should be ashamed of itself?

By way of Guilty Pleasures, I have come to a secret joy in viewing the last few *Nightmare on Elm Street* flicks, as well as Chris Matheson and Ed Solomon's "Bill & Ted" movies. If I have denigrated the former and ignored the latter in previous columns, I want to come clean now. With the current release of FREDDY'S DEAD: THE FINAL NIGHTMARE (New Line) and BILL & TED GO TO HELL (which will forever be the title by which I refer to this movie, its original designation, before Orion Pictures developed water on the knees and timidity on the *cojones* and, I suppose fearing that the Rev. Donald Wildmon and his illiterate army of gargoyles who have no lives beyond beating the bible and writing ungrammatically distraught letters to sponsors would rise in wrath, retitled this amusing little fable BILL & TED'S BOGUS JOURNEY) it is possible for you, too, to play catch-up.

The Freddy Films, as *Film Comment* will no doubt one day validate the cycle, have become more interesting as they went along. This is in defiance of all natural law for movies. The dopey flicks usually get dopier and dopier, until they implode. But the smart cookies at New Line have, one after another, hired clever writers for these shockers; and with this last number I am put more in mind of something Luis Buñuel or Man Ray or Salvador Dali or Fernando Arrabal would dream up than what we usually associate with four-wall exploitation. The last four *Nightmare* scripts have been small masterpieces of surrealism, filled with grisly wit, exciting juxtapositions of contemporary references with historic fear tropes, and rich subtexts that one can enjoy in echo, without feeling artsy-craftsy about the perceptions. Somehow, and don't ask me to explain it in such a snippet of comment, the *Nightmare* films down the line have managed to escape the meanspirited feel of the power-drill-in-the-brain *oeuvre*, and have accrued the goodwill of

those who still dote on the best of the old Universal or Hammer scare films.

As for Bill & Ted, well, when I saw the first of the (sure to be longer) series, I shook my head and dismissed it as a paen to the institutionalized stupidity of a debased audience devoted to Nikes, mall-speak, and anti-intellectualism. Well, maybe that's so, but every time *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* showed up on cable — and it showed up a lot — I found myself rewatching it, and giggling. And that, folks, is my moviegoer's bullshit detector. I cannot watch *Mountains of the Moon* again, or sit one more time through the boredom of *A Cry in the Dark*, but Bill & Ted suck me in like the Sargasso every time I see Keanu Reeves and Alex Winter sowing havoc through time and space.

I guess what I'm saying is that if pure pleasure is the criterion for a film's worth . . . these two dudes are doomed to Posterity's Pucker.

It is a tiny book — merely 5¼" x 6" — and it contains only 80 pages, but if any of you are telling me the truth when you drop me a line to say thanks for recommending this or that item, then I ask you to trust me yet again, and to seek out as assiduously as you can, a blessed event called SKYSHADES (A Panache Press Book from Clarkson Potter Publishers, New York; $17.50).

This is a book of sixty small oil paintings by an artist-fantasist named Fanny Brennan. When I say *small* I mean in comparative size, to, say, Botticelli's *La Primavera* that takes up more than seventy square feet of wall in the Uffizi in Florence, not in breadth of imagination. The largest of the sixty — and they appear as painted in their full size — is maybe 3" x 4", the smallest looks to be about the size of a U.S. commemorative stamp with a thyroid condition. But one shows a dune-filled horizon as background to a pair of calipers measuring a bubble in the foreground; and another shows a rocky spire pierced by a pencil; and in others (as noted art critic Calvin Tomkins says in his foreword) "clouds escape from sacks on an empty beach, and landscapes peel away at the corner to show different landscapes underneath; where gravity takes time off and the normal scale of things is askew . . . and trickery is not in the painting but in the mind — hers and yours."

Repeatedly in this column I have suggested that watching films and reveling in unusual art books are allied pleasures, the one buttressing the other, and both serving to give you new eyes for seeing new things.

If this is so, then you will treasure SKYSHADES. Because within its pocket-sized universe Fanny Brennan has provided postcards of a series of surreal worlds that will return you to the vision of childhood. As were grass and sky and ocean, fresh and new and wondrous, the first time you recognized them, filled with whimsy and inviting infinite mystery . . . thus reinstated are clouds and forests and islands through the tiny, glorious masterpainting of Ms. Brennan, who will put you in mind of Magritte and de Chirico and Ernst and Dali, come again more delicate and cheerful and exquisitely memorable.

You may have to order this one specially from a good bookseller — it came out last year, in a small printing — but don't go to your final sleep never having been thrown into the sky like a baby, laughing and gurgling with pleasure, by Fanny Brennan's tiny, sure, paintbrush-blessed hands.

ANCILLARY MATTERS: From the mail bag I've plucked a few items requiring short shrift. Incidentally, something weird has been happening to the lot of you. Formerly, I received as many letters telling me to drink Lysol as I did benighted plaudits from certifiably-demented enthusiasts who cooed over my every word. Then I guess I got cranky about it, and I complained that I was being abused; and whammitybang the mean letters stopped, for the most part, and now I get these pronunciamentos from everywhichwhere that some of you cannot hope to live out your lives, there in the asylums, unless I keep writing this column. Only joy you know, you say. Brilliance uncontained, you say. Call the ward attendant, I've wet myself, you say.

Well, I'm duly grateful for all the good wishes and kind thoughts, but to tell you the truth it's like those Cagney movies where Jimmy starts out as a street thug, feisty and mean and filled with piss'n'-vinegar . . . and then he gets religion or something, and turns into a good guy. Fascinating at the start, but boring as hell by the denouement. We always like the bitches and bastards best. The villains are always more intriguing than the sanctimonious breakfast-cereal-eating heroes. Mencken said he most enjoyed writing and reading about unusual people, and that meant he read mostly about rotten sonsofbitches. I'm not asking for opprobrium, I'm just saying that something weird has happened to you folks, and I'm getting worried that I'm not doing my job when you're not screeching at me.

Which brings me to Shirley Wander, John McCready, Amanda

Summers (who likes Kathi Maio's stuff, too), David E. Penney, Carla Schoenstein, and Herb Gh---- (I couldn't make out your signature): thank you. Thank you every single one.

Mike Firth sorta corrected me as follows: "It is indeed unfortunate that in your Oct/Nov column you chose Myrna Loy as the example in your comments about breasts showing through clothing, since at one confused point in my sexual wanderings I was surprised and pleased to discover that several of the outfits that Myrna wore in the *Thin Man* series of films allowed her nipples to appear visibly behind the cloth.

"Since I do not watch endless old movies and didn't live through the era, I can't effectively point to other examples; but the gal in the *Thin Man* movies wasn't a complete slut, even if she did enjoy drinking, and manage to be rich."

Mr. Firth, a resident of Dallas, certainly means well by passing along this intelligence; but I confess to being totally at sea in commenting. Save to make this observation: of *all* the words one might apply to the character of Nora Charles, wife of 'tec Nick Charles, mother of Asta, as splendiferously played by the elegant Myrna Loy, the absolute very final *last* word I would have considered would be "slut," complete or partial or heretofore. Maybe I'm missing Firth's forth. Or something.

And as for the several readers who jumped all over Rick Thocker of Russen, Kansas for correcting me on the year of model of the DeLorean in *Back to the Future,* youse guys just leave Rick alone. First of all, I was wrong and he was right. Second, he was only having fun and meant no bad cess. And third of all, geez gang, lighten up, willya!?!

And on that note of civil defense, let me point out only this: the nastiest, ugliest, most vomitous jokes about Pee-wee Herman and Jeffrey Dahmer and Rodney King that are told to me . . . are always told to me by cops. Cop humor is so brutal, it does give one pause about Daryl Gates, if I can make the connection. See ya in the funnies.



Ron Goulart's humorous short fiction has graced the pages of every magazine in the genre. He has written more novels than I care to count and dozens of teleplays (the most recent, "The Werewolf of Hollywood" just aired on the syndicated program, Monsters*). He writes non-fiction too, including a brand new column for* Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine *on comics. In "Hershey's Kisses," Ron examines the new-found notoriety of editor Bob Hershey in a less-than-serious manner.*

Hershey's Kisses

By Ron Goulart

IT'S TOO SOON to tell if his reputation and his career have been seriously affected. Several million cable viewers witnessed some of what happened in that Manhattan penthouse bedroom, and as a result, Bob Hershey is enjoying considerable notoriety at the moment. His initial motive, the reason he got mixed up with sorcery and black magic at all, was nothing more than a perfectly natural desire for job security.

Bob Hershey was a medium-sized, slightly overweight man of thirty-six. His life began to change on a windy Friday morning late in the autumn of the year. His office, which was about eleven feet narrower than he would've like it to be, was on the topmost of three floors occupied by the publishing firm of Ollendorf & Sons. Hershey had been an Associate Editor there for just under three years. Had things gone well, he'd have

been promoted to Senior Editor in January, and the extra thirty-five hundred dollars in annual salary would have helped pull him back from the brink of financial ruin. Things hadn't gone well, however, and the company had been bought two months ago by Blitzgarten, the German conglomerate.

As Hershey sat at his desk, talking on the phone with his mechanic in Brimstone, Connecticut, he caught a glimpse of the former Editor in Chief, the woman who'd promised him the promotion, as she went trudging by in the hall with everything she'd accumulated in her office stuffed now into a cardboard carton that had *Macri Bros. Wines* lettered on its side. Not looking in his direction, she waved a forlorn farewell.

"What's that, Rosco? Sounded like you said my sports car is suffering from chronic melancholy."

"No, no, Mr. Hershey. . . ." Horns began honking again in the background. ". . . and general aphasia."

"I'm having trouble hearing you. Just tell me when it'll be ready."

"Better call me late next Tuesday afternoon."

"The damn car won't be ready until then?"

"I won't be able until then to tell you when it'll be ready."

A few seconds after Hershey hung up, his phone buzzed. "Yeah?"

"There's a Miss Bendix on the phone. She'd like —"

"Who are you? Where's my secretary, Rita?"

"Rita was let go, sir. I'm Nan, sir, filling in until —"

"Hey, I just talked to Rita fifteen minutes ago."

"It was a rather sudden dismissal, sir. This Miss Bendix is with the Pancho LasVegas office. You know: he hosts that cable show 'Invasion of Privacy,' and they —"

"Nope, I don't have time to talk to them. Take a message."

Hanging up, Hershey sighed and turned to gaze out his small window. Several crisp golden leaves went riding by on the sharp wind. That was odd, since there weren't, far as he knew, any trees left in this stretch of New York City.

The phone buzzed again.

"Yeah?"

"A Mr. Zipperly. He sounds almost hysterical, and perhaps you'd rather not —"

"He's one of my authors. Put him on."

Egon Zipperly actually sounded fairly calm, by Zipperly standards. "It's not me who's ticked off, Bob; it's Archie," he said. "Myself, hell, I'd let you miserable scummy bastards stall another month on the goddamn enormous royalties you owe me. Archie, as you know, is —"

"Archie is in a maximum-security prison in rural Kentucky. So he can't —"

"He escaped. Somehow he got hold of a knife. Cut up two guards, a visiting social worker, and somebody there's not enough left of to identify," explained the writer. "They think he's holed up in the Ozarks someplace now. Archie broke into a hardware store, slaughtered the owner and a man who came in to ask for change for a parking meter. He stole six of the largest axes they had in stock. You remember how Archie is about axes."

"Egon, Archie can't collect any royalties from the book. There's a law against that."

"No, no, Archie is concerned about *my* royalties and the fact that you slimy scumbags have been withholding them. The guy really identifies with me. Did I ever tell you what he did to my former agent?"

"Egon, everybody here at Ollendorf is really pleased with the way the new paperback edition of *Chop: Story of a Crazed Ax Murderer* has been selling," said Hershey soothingly. "But, as I've told you, since the Blitzgarten takeover, the Accounting Department has been really screwed up, and everybody is —"

"Do you know what Archie said when I told him that? 'Bullshit.' And then he made that funny noise he —"

"You're in communication with him?"

"Well, the poor guy calls me from pay phones now and then."

"But he's still down in the Ozarks someplace, hiding out?"

"Far as I know. Him and those half a dozen axes."

"I'll go in and talk to Accounting soon as I hang up," he promised, and hung up.

The phone buzzed.

"Miss Bendix says they're doing a program on Janine Warbler, and since you and she were once a torrid item, would you —"

"Janine and I were never anything, least of all torrid. She merely thinks, since she's an absolute and total loon, that I . . . but never mind."

"I heard you'd planted some of those famous Hershey's kisses on her."

Hershey answered that with silence and put down the phone. "Ninety-two thousand, six hundred and six," he muttered. That was, approximately, how many times, since childhood, that he'd been kidded because he had the same name as that of a famous chocolate concern.

"Got a minute?" Kevin Mulrooney was leaning in the open doorway, holding the rough layout for the cover of *Invasion of the Bioflavonoids*. He was tall, thin, and bald.

"Come on in." Hershey began rummaging through the assortment of folders, manuscripts, letters, and sundries piled high atop his desk. "My sports car seems to have mental problems. A madman with an ax is unhappy with his royalty situation. This is not the life I envisioned when I graduated from finishing school."

"I always saw myself ending up as a distinguished gent with lots of white hair. What are you hunting for?"

"Here it is. A memo from Oskar Hitler, our new CEO."

"See? There are worse things to be named after than a candy bar."

"Ninety-two thousand, six hundred and seven," Hershey said. "This thing says — 'As of today, our entire sci-fi line is dead. All titles in production are to be suspended.' Thank you for your help, Oskar Hitler."

Mulrooney sank into the only other chair in the small office. "Shit."

"Exactly. I forgot to tell you when I got this damn memo yesterday afternoon."

Mulrooney leaned the layout, gently, against a filing cabinet. "You see so few **help wanted** ads asking for tall, skinny Art Directors with no hair," he explained. "that's the reason I don't quit."

"Things have been lousy since the takeover."

"Aw, you won't have to worry, Robert."

"Hum?"

"Your old true love is coming here to run the whole operation. Yeah, I heard that at a reliable cocktail party just last night."

Slowly, Hershey sat up very stiff and straight in his lopsided chair. "When you say my old true love, you mean my erstwhile wife? She isn't likely to run Ollendorf, since she's down in some tropic paradise, spending my alimony checks on fripperies and —"

"I'm talking about Janine Warbler. The word is, she's leaving Mildmay Books to become Editor in Chief of our —"

"Oh my God." He pressed his hands to his chest. "My whole life is

starting to pass before my eyes. I must be dying."

Mulrooney grinned. "I was under the impression, Robert, that you and Warbler were once quite close."

"Janine had me fired from Mildmay four years ago. She smeared my reputation, and I was out of work for nearly a year. If there hadn't been people here who loathed her as much as I do, I would probably never have worked in publishing again."

"You're telling me you and Warbler were never lovers?"

"O.K., listen. There was a party. Five years ago in the Village. I did have a few drinks, but I never lost touch with reality. As I recall it, Janine and I had a short conversation in the kitchen — we were alone at the time, I admit — about the novels of Robert Musil and Joseph Roth. Janine claims, though, that I grabbed her, fondled her, and planted hot kisses on her face and body."

"She's not bad-looking, so it —"

"I never so much as touched the woman," swore Hershey. "But she became obsessed with the notion I was a human beast, somebody who belongs in a book by Egon Zipperly. She got a job at Mildmay, and within two years, had worked up to a position of power. She'd been perfectly content at her other publishing house; she took the new editorial job only so she'd be at the same outfit with me. Then, when she was running things, she fired me."

"Why didn't you sit down and reason with her?"

"She's a very emotional woman." Hershey shook his head. "You don't reason with Janine."

"If she does come here to work as your boss, what'll you do?"

"Probably something violent," answered Hershey.

ALTHOUGH IT was raining on Saturday, Hershey went hiking anyway. He'd found that solitary hiking in Witch's Wood, the thirty-acre nature preserve near his thoroughly mortgaged home in Brimstone, Connecticut, was conducive to brooding. Hands in pockets, collar of his down jacket turned up, old golf hat tugged down low on his forehead, he was trudging the winding, narrow trail that led to Suicide Pond.

The rain that was falling down through the gray afternoon was chill and hard, well on its way to becoming hail. It poked at Hershey's ears,

prodding at his hunched shoulders. He'd been walking for over twenty minutes, and hadn't as yet encountered another human being. Off among the stiff, nearly leafless trees, some kind of angry-sounding birds were calling to each other.

Hershey had been thinking about his future, but found that too dismal a topic, and was now striving to make his mind an absolute and total blank.

"Excuse me, squire. Might I make what may initially sound like an odd and unusual request of you?"

Hershey, making a gasping noise, came to a sudden halt on the muddy pathway. Frowning, he glanced into the shadowy woods at his left and then at his right. He didn't see anyone.

"Next I'd like to ask you not to start screaming like a dozen blue devils when you first lay eyes on me. And, if you can, try not to go rushing away into the blinking dusk."

"If this is a practical joke, boy, have you picked the wrong target," he announced to the woodlands in general. "I recently edited a book about an ax murderer, and I picked up some useful tips on how—"

"If you could stroll over a mite closer to the maple tree, squire?"

"Which tree is that?"

"Mayhap you ought to see about editing a basic book of woodlore. You've been slogging through this blinking preserve for near to six years now, and you, apparently, don't yet know a maple from a poplar or an elm. O.K. I'll make things easier for you and manifest myself. Stay put."

Brush near the tree that must be the maple rattled. Then an unimpressive and woebegone raccoon came skittering into view, watching Hershey intently. "I had in mind a more impressive champion, but you'll have to do, I suppose," it said to him.

Taking a step back, Hershey took another look around. "O.K., kids, this is sufficient. I'm not really in the mood for ventriloquism or hidden speakers."

"Do I look like a blooming trick? Do I appear to be dubbed?" The raccoon reared up on its hind legs, poking at its furry chest with a delicate forefinger. "Now, what say we get down to business? And, whilst I'm narrating my plight, try to keep an open mind."

Hershey gave the twilight woods a more careful scanning. "This must be one of those hidden-camera shows—*'People Are Fools'* or *'America's*

Biggest Idiots.' Is it?"

"The way this works, alas, I can approach only one potential savior per year. You seem to be it, and I ain't any happier about that than you."

The damn thing really did seem to be talking to him. It had a piping voice and a slightly British accent. "Of course, it may be that I've just gone completely around the bend, " he told the raccoon. "This is a hallucination, and —"

"You're borderline bonkers at best, squire. This is really happening," the impatient animal assured him. "If you'd be so kind as to attend to me. You can save me from another full year of emotional trauma and foraging in garbage cans, simply by doing me a small — one might almost class it minute and minuscule — favor.

"Wait now." Moving closer, he squatted, eyeing the raccoon. "You aren't going to tell me that you're under an enchantment?"

"Bingo. You got it first crack."

"Somebody's put a spell on you?"

"Right again. You're brighter than you look."

"If you're trying to wheedle a favor out of me, insults aren't going to help your cause much."

"True, forgive me, do." The raccoon gave a small, contrite shrug of its shaggy shoulders. "Very well, then, squire, here's the pitch. A rival sorcerer put this blinking spell on me back in 1979, and I've been trying ever since to —"

"Rival sorcerer? You're a sorcerer, too?"

"In my true human form, yes, I am. Right now, though, I'm without my full magical resources," it admitted. "The manner in which you have to break this particular spell may strike you as trite, but my archenemy wasn't an especially imaginative chap, and he had a perverse streak as well. I'm getting a weak message that you've also edited a book of folk tales, so you are probably aware that—"

"Whoa. No, nope. Absolutely not." Hershey stood up, took yet another glance around him. "Is this your idea, Mulrooney? Are you lurking in the trees someplace, chortling?" he asked the damp, darkened woods.

"Mulrooney's over in Jersey at the moment, in the sack with that new Assistant Editor in the Young Adult Department," the raccoon informed him. "O.K., what you have to do is — well, kiss me."

"Sure this has to be a gag. Hershey's kisses again. Christ, that makes

ninety-two thousand, six hundred and eleven times since the unfortunate day I was born that some wiseass has—"

"Look, Hershey, I don't make the rules. I had a spell put on me, and this is the way the damn thing works."

"How come you know my name?"

"You just blurted it out. Besides, it isn't much of a trick, even for someone running on diminished mystical powers, to guess some gink's name and occupation."

Hershey asked, "You're a guy sorcerer, a male?"

"I am not an enchanted princess. Sorry."

"I don't know; if it got around that I kissed a guy—"

"A raccoon. I'm a raccoon at the moment," the animal pointed out. "And who's to know? I'm not going to blab."

"I might get rabies."

"I can assure you I'm not suffering from rabies."

"So you say."

"You don't have to kiss me on the mouth. A simple peck on the noggin will do."

Hershey tugged at the soggy brim of his golf hat. "What's in it for me?"

"Doing a humane deed ought to be its own reward."

"I suppose so. But traditionally there are perks. A pot of gold, a cask of jewels, three wishes, marriage to a princess — things along that line."

"Tell you what, Hersh. You help me out, and I'll show you how to get the best of Janine Warbler."

"You know about her, too?"

"I've been getting faint glimmers from realms beyond."

Hershey took a last, careful look around. "O.K." Leaning, he kissed the raccoon, gingerly, on its forehead.

The sorcerer was still there, sprawled in the big black leatherette armchair in the family room and gazing toward the television screen, when Hershey came home, weary, from work on Monday evening. "What are you up to, Runcible?" he inquired. "I still think that's a nitwit name, by the way."

"It was bestowed upon me. I've been playing video games, squire."

"I don't have a video-game setup."

"When one is a first-rate magician, one doesn't require the mundane

paraphernalia of—"

"I thought you were going to use your powers to find yourself a place to live. A place other than mine."

Runcible had turned out to be a short, pudgy man with tight-curling white hair. He dressed in a rumpled, tweedy suit, a pink shirt, and a rainbow-pattern tie. Over that ensemble he wore a floor-length tan overcoat. He appeared to be in his middle sixties and never took off his frayed yellow gloves. "I'm still recuperating," he replied in his high-pitched voice. "Being a blinking raccoon for lo these many years has taken its toll."

Hershey, hunched slightly, dropped his attaché case at the doorway and slouched over to the low white sofa. He sat facing the wizard. "About Janine Warbler," he said.

"In another few days at most, squire, I'll be strong enough to tackle your problem with that—"

"It's definite she's coming to Ollendorf. She's going to be Editor in Chief *and* Vice President," he said, sagging. "My days there are numbered."

"Don't go fretting. I'll use my impressive talents as a warlock to—"

"As of the first of the month, Runcible, I'll be tossed out of there. All because Janine claims I kissed her that fateful night in—"

"Kisses." Runcible sat suddenly upright, his short legs kicking a few times. He gestured at the TV set, and it turned off. "Hush a minute, squire. I'm getting a flash." He thrust a gloved hand deep into one of the cluttered pockets of his lengthy overcoat. "I must consult my crystal."

When Runcible tugged the baseball-sized crystal from his pocket, a small lizard fell free and went scurrying across the peach-colored rug and up the drapes.

"Is that your crystal ball? It looks scuffed and sticky."

"Maintain silence. This happens to be the Sacred Crystal of Sargon." After burnishing it on the left sleeve of his coat, Runcible brought the ball up near his face and squinted into it. The sphere commenced glowing with a faint green. "Janine Warbler . . . Yessir, I'm seeing an image of Janine Warbler. Goodness me, the lass is jaybird naked and about to step into her shower bath."

"Let's see." Hershey started to leave the sofa.

"Stay back; don't shatter the delicate spell." The sorcerer waved him away with his free hand. "Why, oh mystical guides from the spirit world,

are you showing me a close-up of this bimbo's rear end? Ah, I see. I am to pay particular attention to the beetle."

"What beetle?" Hershey was poised on the edge of the sofa cushion.

"Ah, I see. Yes, the secret mark that is tattooed on her left buttock . . . sacred scarab of. . . . Say again? I'm not getting this, fellows." He tightened his grip on the crystal ball. "How's that again? I missed part of it. . . . He has to do what? He has to. . . . Don't talk so fast. Ah yes. But what exactly will that accomplish? I see. It. . . ." His body went slack.

Runcible slumped in the chair, his eyes falling shut. The fingers of his gloved right hand snapped open, and the crystal, no longer glowing green, dropped from his grasp, thunked onto the carpet, and rolled three and a half feet in the direction of the shallow fireplace.

Hershey rushed over to him. "Hey, are you O.K.?"

The wizard blinked. "It's exhausting work, this sorcery stuff. Especially when you're a touch rusty. If I'd been in peak form, I might've found out a lot more for you," he explained, wheezing some. "I may be able to contact them again, although most times—"

"What did you find out about Janine?"

Runcible stood up, brushed at his overcoat, sat back down. "Wellsir, I didn't pick up all this as clearly as I would've liked," he said, intertwining his gloved fingers. "The upshot, near as I can get it, is that the young woman has a special sort of mystical tattoo on her bum. It's magical in some way, but I didn't get all the details on that."

"How come I couldn't hear anything?"

Runcible tapped the side of his head. "My spirit guides communicate telepathically—and show me pictures in the crystal. Could you fetch it for me?"

Hershey walked to where it had rolled, then knelt and scooped up the globe. It was sticky. "What's this tattoo have to do with anything?"

"As I understand the situation, squire, you're going to have to. . . . Thanks." He accepted the crystal ball, gave it a fond squeeze before dumping it back amidst the clutter of his overcoat pocket. "To gain some sort of control over the lady in question, you have to kiss the beetle tattoo. That—"

"More kissing."

"Kissing the beetle gives you power over Janine. I'm not exactly sure why. You have to buss it thrice, by the way."

Hershey sat down. "You're telling me that, based on information from your contacts in the mystic realms, I have to arrange things so that I can plant not one, but three kisses on Janine's bare backside? That's the only way I can hold on to my job?"

"That about sums it up, yep."

"I'd better start updating my résumé."

THURSDAY AFTERNOON, there were snow flurries. From his office window, Hershey could see swirls of snowflakes go flickering by. He turned away from the window, concentrating again on surveying the movable contents of his office. It was going to take more than one carton to haul all this crap out of here. Maybe he should simply leave it all and let them turn his office into a shrine.

Of course, it was still possible he wouldn't have to leave. Runcible kept assuring him, between protracted sessions of video gaming, that sorcery — with possibly a bit of black magic tossed in — was going to save him and his job. His sorcerer houseguest hadn't as yet explained how that was going to work.

"Oy," Hershey remarked.

"Hitler hasn't canceled this series, too, has he?" Mulrooney appeared in the doorway, holding up a cover rough for the latest novel in the Young Adult *Unwed Mothers Hospital* series. "It would actually come as a profound relief if he has."

"No such luck. What's that thing in the foreground."

"An owl. This novel is the one where the owls in the woods behind the hospital are endangered, and Nurse Vicki and Intern Billy save them, remember?"

"Your owl looks like a watermelon with sunglasses." Hershey slouched in his chair. "But why should I care? I'll be given the heave-ho before the year runs out."

"Perhaps not." Mulrooney, tucking the drawing under his arm, came in and sat.

"What do you mean? Isn't Janine coming in to rule this place with an iron hand?"

"She's still scheduled to, yes," said Mulrooney, lowering his voice and leaning forward. "However, I've gotten to know Miss Bendix, the one who's been trying to contact you. She's Pancho LasVegas's assistant, as you may

recall, and she tells me they're planning an 'Invasion of Privacy' show aimed at exposing Janine Warbler. Showing how she clawed her way to the top of publishing, how she —"

"There's nothing unusual or newsworthy about clawing your way to the top."

"Yeah, but they apparently have proof that she indulged in some shady practices to get her present exalted post. There are also hints of amorous adventures."

"What good is all this going to do me?"

"The show's set to air very soon. It could tarnish her reputation enough to cause Blitzgarten to have second thoughts about her."

"Naw, if Blitzgarten were the sort of outfit that ever had second thoughts, they wouldn't own us now."

"I think you ought to talk to Miss Bendix. She's got great legs, and 'Invasion of Privacy' is, as I see it, on your side."

"Nope, pass."

"They may drop in on you anyway. The show is noted for busting in on people, walking into motels, breaking into meetings, doggedly pursuing the truth."

"I'm not interesting enough to be broken in on," he assured Mulrooney.

On Friday night at a few minutes past eleven, Hershey was standing in a New York City alley in the East Sixties. A light snow was falling, and, hands deep in the pockets of his down jacket, he was shivering and muttering. He'd been waiting here beside the Manhattan Museum of Folklore for seventeen minutes now.

"Eighteen," he corrected after tugging his hand out of his pocket and checking his wristwatch yet again.

"All set, squire." Runcible, his long overcoat buttoned up tight, appeared at the alley's mouth. "Come along."

"I thought your mystic powers could put anybody into a trance in less than —"

"Can I help it if the night watchman at this benighted museum likes to nap on the job? Took awhile to awaken the coot out of his tipsy doze." He beckoned with a gloved hand. "We can now, I am pleased to announce, slip into the joint undetected."

"It took you eighteen minutes to wake this guy up?"

"You can't simply start putting a spell on someone the blinking second you meet him," explained the sorcerer as they hurried up the snow-covered stone steps of the darkened museum. "A certain amount of prelim chitchat is needed to get him in a relaxed and receptive mood; some cordial banter has to be exchanged."

"Eighteen minutes of banter is a lot of banter."

Runcible pushed at the wide metal door, and it swung open. "This particular watchman wasn't an ideal subject."

"That's why it took you so long?"

"That and tying and gagging the fellow."

They were in a shadowy corridor, which smelled strongly of dust, furniture polish, and time. "If he's in a trance, why was it necessary to tie—"

"In the end, squire, I had to bop him on the sconce."

Hershey halted next to a glass case full of beaded necklaces. "That's assault."

"Sometimes a nice, simple bit of assault works as well as wizardry."

"I don't know." Hershey shook his head. "This isn't going as smoothly as—"

"We'd best hurry along," advised the sorcerer. "The exhibit we seek lies through yonder door on your left."

"You're certain this is going to work?"

"The message came in loud and clear."

Hershey crossed the indicated threshold. "I've been thinking that if this Sacred Ring of Karnabahar actually had the magic powers your mystical advisers claim, it wouldn't be on display in this rinky-dink little museum."

"Many objects of extreme occult power lie hidden from the average gink," reminded the wizard. "We're on a tight schedule, so move along. There's the statue yonder." He pointed across the dim-lit room.

"That's Karnabahar?"

A large wooden effigy, about seven feet high and resembling a muscular man with the head of a dog, stood on a low pedestal near a high, thin window. "He was a highly thought-of deity in ancient Makkaristan. Virgins sacrificed annually, bullocks offered up once a month, the works."

"That was a long time ago, thousands of years. Could be the magic

powers of the ring have worn out."

"Magic doesn't have to be recharged, squire. Shake a leg now and kiss the ring."

"That's something else that unsettles me," mentioned Hershey, halting next to the statue of the ancient god and gazing at it. "All this odd kissing I'm doing lately. This whole mess, after all, started when Janine thought —"

"The ring you want is the silver one with the fake ruby. Don't kiss the gold one with the fake emerald or that one made out of animal teeth. Smooch it right on the stone for the best results."

"How many times do I have to kiss it?"

"Just once, according to my information."

"And then I turn invisible?"

"So my mystical guides informed me when I asked them to suggest a foolproof way for you to sneak into Janine Warbler's boudoir undetected."

"It's a cold night."

"That it is, squire, but we can discuss the weather after you—"

"In order to take full advantage of being invisible, supposing that this thing actually works, I'm going to have to strip off my clothes."

"It will aid the effect, yes."

"Taking off all my clothes on a night like this, I'm going to freeze my ass."

"A frozen ass is better than a blighted career," the sorcerer pointed out. "Kiss the ring, Hersh. I think I hear the watchman groaning."

Hershey glanced around the dim room, eyeing the lurking glass cases and the dark statues. Nodding, he took a deep breath, stretched up, and kissed the ring.

"I'm getting goosebumps."

"They don't show."

Hershey was sitting on the chill passenger seat of his Zitrone 210S. "I'm going to have to take this car back to the shop and have them work on the heater," he said. He was naked and invisible.

The sorcerer was at the wheel of the sports car, rubbing at the steamy windshield with the heel of his left hand and the frayed cuff of his overcoat. "Ah yes, there's a space right up ahead."

"Janine's apartment is over on East Seventy-second; this is East

Seventy-third." Hershey shivered and rubbed his unseen hands together, missing the first time he tried to bring them into contact. "I'd prefer not to trudge through the sleet and snow for a whole damn block."

"You still don't appreciate the fact, Hersh, that great deeds require great sacrifices. Once, for example —"

A loud scraping sound interrupted him.

Hershey said, "Damn, more bodywork."

Runcible succeeded finally, with only a little more banging and scraping, in getting the car parked. "There now, snug as a whistle."

"One wheel up on the curb, the fender pushed into a lamppost—that's not my idea of snug."

"I'll escort you to the door of the building," said the sorcerer. "While I'm distracting the doorman, you slip into the building and scoot up to the lass's apartment." He opened the door, which let in a fiercely cold gust of night wind. Stepping to the street, Runcible wrapped his long, heavy overcoat tighter around him.

"She's probably not even home." Very carefully, Hershey stepped barefoot onto the snowy sidewalk. "Ow wow, this is cold."

"The lady is home, alone and sound asleep," said the sorcerer. "My mystical sources have already informed me of that."

"Her apartment will be locked up tighter than—"

"The crystal told us the door to her kitchen is unlocked. You're going to use that, remember?"

Hershey was starting to shiver violently; his invisible feet were turning numb. "I'm leaving footprints in the slush."

"Can't be helped. We'll cross the street here and head around the corner."

"Suppose Janine wakes up while I'm planting the kisses?"

"Won't matter."

"Why?"

"Because once you kiss the beetle mark three times, that'll give you, I suppose, some kind of control over her. We've already been over all the —"

"You suppose?"

"Some of the messages, as you recall, didn't come across clearly," said Runcible, halting on the snow-covered sidewalk. "Speaking of which, there's the possibility you'll remain invisible for only an hour."

"Hey, you told me three. You swore that your magical correspondents

guaranteed you that kissing that damn Sacred Ring of Karnabahar would make me completely and totally unseen for no less than three solid hours."

"Actually, that was one of the details that came across the void a bit blurred, squire," admitted the sorcerer. "Thinking about it now — well, I'm not all that confident they may not've been trying to say one hour rather than three hours."

"I kissed the thing twenty minutes ago, meaning I may have only—"

"Best not to dawdle here in idle chitchat," Runcible pointed out.

A DOG LUNGED into the elevator a few seconds after the unseen Hershey had dived into the cage. A small pinkish poodle, it became immediately fascinated with him.

The weary gray-haired man who'd just come back from taking it for a walk tugged at the poodle's leash. "Knock it off, asshole," he advised the dog.

The poodle began sniffing vigorously at Hershey's invisible toes, making a perplexed growling sound in its tiny chest.

"C'mon, quiet down, putz." The weary man gave another tug of the leash.

Hershey stood stiffly, holding his breath, debating whether or not to give the hound an invisible kick.

The elevator shuddered to a stop at the tenth floor. The door whooshed open. The man, grabbing up the agitated poodle, took his leave.

Alone in the climbing cage, Hershey let out his breath in a long sigh. He noticed that the snow he picked up on his bare feet had melted and left a small puddle on the carpet.

Rattling, the elevator stopped again and opened its door. This was the thirteenth floor.

Hershey stumbled out into the corridor. He hadn't realized how much he looked down at his feet while walking. Not being able to do that now made moving somewhat difficult. He weaved some, staggered a little.

He was about fifteen feet from Janine's when an apartment door across the hall opened a few inches. Hershey had the impression someone was peeking out. The door shut quickly and quietly.

He hesitated, eyeing the door he wanted. After a few seconds, he started moving again. He found the kitchen door was indeed unlocked, but

it produced an enormous rasping noice when he pulled it carefully open. The door across the way was opening again as Hershey slipped into Janine's kitchen. He shut the door, leaned against it.

There was a single light showing over the sink. The large white-and-yellow room smelled strongly of health foods.

Hershey paused at the sink. He had the sudden desire for a glass of water. Reaching out, he took hold of the faucet handle.

He was turning it gingerly, when he noticed fingers. Three at first, starting from the little finger. Next the thumb and forefinger appeared.

"Mother of Mercy," he muttered as he stood watching his entire right hand and then his wrist materialize.

He moved back, shaking his head forlornly, and sat on a white kitchen stool. In a little less than three minutes by the wall clock, he became entirely visible once more.

"So here I am, naked as a jaybird and perfectly visible, sitting smack in the middle of Janine's kitchen at six minutes before midnight," he said. "No wonder Karnabahar doesn't have any worshipers these days."

Getting clear of the apartment seemed the best thing to do, except that he was naked. To travel down thirteen floors in the elevator, cross the lobby, and walk out into the street was going to be difficult. What he'd have to do was borrow a raincoat or something similar out of Janine's closet.

Still, as long as he was going to prowl around, he might as well try to do what he'd come for. She was, according to Runcible's not-always-reliable sources, supposed to be sound asleep now in her bedroom. He might, with a little luck, be able to sneak in there unheard and kiss the tattoo.

He started to stand up, then sat quickly down. Hershey had heard some whispering and murmuring from out in the hall. Perched, very still, on the stool, he listened. A minute clicked by, during which he heard nothing further.

Leaving his perch, he pushed through the swinging door and into the large dining room. It was dark, and, staying close to one wall, he flatfooted across and into the living room. That was even bigger, and its high, wide window showed the snowy night outside and the apartment buildings that rose high all around.

He remained for a minute with his back to the fireplace. The last remnants of a fire still glowed, warming him some. The door to Janine's

bedroom, according to Runcible, was the one immediately to the right of the ceiling-high bookcases. He made his way to that, took hold of the brass knob, and slowly turned it. The door opened quietly, and he crossed the shadowy threshold.

The bedroom was lit by a small globular night-light plugged in close to the floor near Janine's wide, low bed. Hershey remained, breath held, near the doorway.

Janine was in the bed, her long dark hair spilled across the pink pillow. She was breathing evenly, snoring in a quiet, purring way.

Moving very slowly and quietly, Hershey made his way over to the sleeping editor.

She was sleeping on her stomach, which would make accessing her backside easier. After risking a very cautious breath, Hershey took hold of the top of the quilt that covered Janine. As delicately and deftly as he could, he began peeling it away from her. Janine was, as the sorcerer had predicted, sleeping naked.

Bending closer, Hershey, with narrowed eyes, scrutinized Janine's left buttock. The beetle tattoo was just discernible in the yellowish glow of the night-light.

The young woman stirred, murmuring into her pillow.

Hershey straightened up, ready to retreat. He glanced around until he located the closet. But the sleeping editor didn't awaken.

After shrugging once, Hershey bent again. Very carefully, he rested both palms on the mattress. Then, slowly, he began lowering his head toward the vicinity of the dark tattoo.

He missed the first try, kissing instead her upper right thigh.

Now Janine started stirring, murmuring.

Hershey dived and planted the three requisite kisses, all on target.

She rolled over, sat up, gasped. "Oh, it's you, Bob," she said, recognizing him.

"Let me explain, Janine, what must appear at first glance, I have to admit, like a somewhat odd and unusual—"

"There's no need to apologize, Bob dear," she told him, smiling. "I was expecting you sooner or later. I knew that sooner or later you'd come to your senses about me."

"Come to *my* senses about *you*? Holy Hannah, for years it's been you who has persecuted me, vilified —"

"Only because you kept ignoring me. That's why I spread those stories about us initially. But instead of seeing more of me, you went and got married to somebody else. That really ticked me off, and I . . . well, I set out to get my revenge. Sometimes love and hate can be very close."

"Yeah, close."

She patted the bed beside her. "Sit here, darling," she invited. "First I have to confess something. It's really a very dreadful thing to have resorted to, and I really didn't even believe in it — but it does seem to have worked where nothing else would, doesn't it?"

"I don't think I'm following all this, Janine."

She took hold of his hand. "I must sound like a babbling idiot," she said apologetically. "Well, a week or so ago, after attending a party for one of our authors, I found myself down in the Village. I had, don't know why, a sudden impulse to get tattooed."

"Tattooed," he said slowly. "Then that beetle is new?"

"Yes, it was an impulse thing," she admitted. "Sometimes, when I've had more than two or three glasses of wine, I get impulses. The thing is, the tattoo artist sensed that I was unhappy, and he confided in me that he was a sorcerer. I've never fooled with anything like that previously, but he was extremely convincing. He persuaded me that, for a fee, a fairly stiff one, he would be able to help me get what I wanted in this world. Now that you're divorced, I thought it would be O.K. if I had him help me get you, and —"

"This sorcerer has gray curly hair?"

"Why yes."

"Wears a long tan overcoat."

"Well, there was a long tan overcoat hanging on a peg in his tattoo parlor."

"Then it looks like we—"

It was at that point that Pancho LasVegas and a camera crew from "Invasion of Privacy" burst into the bedroom and started taping.



Wayne Wightman first appeared in these pages in December of 1982 with a story called "Condemned, a Kiss and Sleep." Since then, his off-beat perspective has filled our pages a number of times. Although his production has slowed recently, thanks to a novel he's been working on as well as the time he's taken to enjoy his first child, he still had the time to send this piece to us. "The Cretaceous Waltz" is as off-beat as the rest — a quirky and sentimental love story with a strange twist.

The Cretaceous Waltz

By Wayne Wightman

THEY DID NOT know each other. Both had worked years for Division Nine at midlevel jobs, but Division Nine was feeling competition from Eight and needed to streamline, conserve, and reorganize, so they were fired — both on the same day. That was where they first saw each other, in the firing room. They had that in common.

Like everyone else, they thought only Other People got fired, and so, secure in their thoughts, they had saved little money.

Within two months they were living in public shelters, eating food that three months ago they would have thrown away. They sank into despair, and one day they spoke to each other. They were sitting on a bench in the exercise yard, eyes glazed, the weight of hopelessness bending their shoulders low.

"Hello," Jale said.

Cella smiled. "Hi."

Later in the day, he found an old rosebush in a vacant lot, cut off the five roses with a chip of sharp-edged concrete, and then removed the thorns, one by one.

Cella was overjoyed. Her eyes sparkled, and they were in love.

The next day, as though to prove that Fate now favored them, Division Eight sent them both applications for Grade 5 Scout work. They filled out the papers and added a note that they hoped they could be assigned together.

They were assigned together. This, they thought, meant something.

Three weeks later Jale and Cella stood in the mud flat beside their shelter-dome, in the rain, up to their ankles in water as thick as pudding. In the mud slurry around them, leeches flipped from side to side, making momentary *O*'s with their black glistening bodies before disappearing deeper into the muck. Jale and Cella were as filled with wonder and love as if they were standing in Eden.

"My love," Jale said with great formality, "may I have this dance?"

"But of course," Cella answered, taking his right hand with her left, fitting herself against him, and dancing slowly through the leech-swarming mud to music only they could hear.

Privately, Jale and Cella thought of themselves as hopelessly ordinary and uninteresting, excepting, of course, for their flaws of body and character, which they considered glaring to the point of disfigurement. Though only twenty-eight, Jale was stoop-shouldered, and he thought that that, along with his full lips, made him look moronic. Cella said she loved his lips and had noticed nothing out of the ordinary about his shoulders.

Cella, on the other hand, had one eye that seemed always to be slightly squinting, and she had trouble with her teeth. She was twenty-nine, though she looked thirty-five now, and knew she would look forty in another year. Jale never thought of her age and saw nothing wrong with her eyes. In fact — and he was truthful about this — he loved her eyes most of all, for it was through those eyes that she saw what she loved: him.

Their private joke was: "We're two boring, uninteresting, ordinary people, madly in love with each other, and perfectly happy."

Now they danced slowly on the rain-stippled surface of a place known in the registries only as 5118-T8. They called it theirs.

When they first landed, he brought out from hiding a dozen red and

white long-stemmed roses, from which he had removed the thorns, and laid them in her arms. They had never been happier.

Around them lay a seething continent of jungle and swamp. Trees grew on stilted platforms of tangled roots, their trunks scale-barked and dark from the constant drizzle. The thick, warm air smelled of fungus, thriving bacteria, and blossoming mold. Screaming birds of blue and gold flapped their heavy wings and dived from one nearby tree to another, clinging to the glistening bark with wing-claws; then they would climb higher, into the canopy of foliage. Their every movement caused showers of water to fall from the leaves, heavy, plopping drops amidst the metallic sound of light rain on the mud. Occasionally a small reptile or rat-sized mammal skittered from beneath a tree, plowing through the thick water, over to the next root cluster.

Jale and Cella had not been sent to this place to be happy. They had been sent to set up life-form survey equipment, but no one pretended it was time-consuming work. Grade 5 Scout work was oppressive, boring, and the conditions extreme. Often, if a single person was sent to such a place, he would be gone, vanished, when the lander came to retrieve him. If couples were sent, there were occasional fatalities. But here, now, Jale and Cella would have twenty weeks to look into each other's eyes, admire their fortune in being brought together, and revel in the pulse and stroke of one body against the other.

Inside the shelter-dome, it was dry and cool, and the only sounds were of the rain on the roof, the sliding of wet clothes from their bodies, and the quiet clicks of the counter that registered any insect or reptile or mammal or worm in the vicinity of the scanners they had placed around their habitat earlier that afternoon. With their meager chores now completed, they slipped into the cocoon of their affection, breathing each other's breath and living in each other's skin.

At dawn of their first new day there, they had stood outside their dome and surveyed the steaming, rain-misted forest. They wore bodysuits that hovered several millimeters over their skin and kept them warm and dry and gave protection from leeches, insect bites, and minor scrapes or scratches. They danced slowly to private music. Cella held him tightly. "What an awful world," she said. A furry creature the size of a house cat

scuttled through the soupy water from one root cluster to another. They saw several leeches wiggling the creature's matted fur, trying to find skin. "With us both here, it could be no better."

"It is awful," he said. "It's just the right place for two uninteresting people to be perfectly content."

Their world — all worlds, the universe, even — seemed to them to be exactly as it should be.

Then, as if to impress them even more, several hundred meters away, they saw a lumbering, semireptilian thing pushing its bulk through the trees at the far end of the clearing. It was mud-colored, heavily plated, and nearly as large as their dome.

"I never thought I'd see one of those," Cella whispered.

"We're supposed to be too far south for them."

They watched it browse, nipping at bits of low foliage with its small head. Then it lumbered away into the forest.

Holding hands, Jale and Cella walked to the nearby river. It flowed high and fast, the water muddy, carrying clumps of leaves and weeds, branches, even entire trees, down its turbulent middle. The mud at their feet was marked with rapidly fading tracks of many insects.

"The weather should be dryer in a few weeks," he said. "But I'll love you then, too."

She squeezed his hand.

They watched the water in the middle of the river boil and swirl, pulling a huge tree beneath the surface.

"Before, I had everything, and I wasn't happy. Here I have rain and mud and leeches — and you — and I've never been more content."

The tree shot through the surface of the water, the trunk emerging root-end first like a gnarled fist, and then plunged back down, out of sight.

DURING THE following weeks, as the sky gradually cleared, they made love and ate and basked in each other's presence to the fainter and fainter drumming of the rain on the dome-top and to the faster clicking of the counters.

The sensors they had positioned in the swamp registered species after species, counted their numbers, and made preliminary ecological correlations based on what had been learned from similar outposts on other worlds.

Then, one morning when they awakened, there was no sound of rain on the dome, and the dehumidifier chugged noisily. When Jale de-opaqued the windows, the sun blazed from the east, making the water bright as liquid chrome, and the trees and foliage diamond-studded. Cella stood next to him, against him, and both were awestruck at the new beauty of their world.

"We must be Chosen," one of them whispered.

Within hours the counters inside the dome no longer clicked sporadically — they made a steady buzz. Life on their world had bloomed.

While preparing their lunch — small plates of Gruyère cheese and bread and glasses of Riesling — Jale leaned toward Cella and said, "Let's take our lunch outside. Let's go without our bodysuits this afternoon and feel the real air of this place against our skins. Let's have a picnic!"

Cella nodded excitedly. "I'd like to get out," she said, "and see what it really looks like without having lenses over my eyes."

"It is, after all, our world," he said with a grin.

"For the next fourteen weeks, anyway," she said.

The air was thick with humidity and the rich smell of mud, wet scale bark, and of leaves warming in the sun, pulling energy from the light.

Toward the river the mud slurry had drained and was now hard enough to walk on without sinking. Around them the trees shimmered with blue-and-gold birds that climbed through the branches and searched for insects in the foliage. Many-legged things the size of coins skittered around root clusters, pausing to turn over chunks of hardening dirt, feed on something smaller, and move on. Everywhere, something moved, hunted — or evaded hunting — fed, and moved on.

At the river, Jale and Cella marveled at the size of the water spiders. They were as big as human hands, and with their long needle-tongues, they fished through the tenuous surface as they slid over the surface of the calm river. Deep in the clear water, several more meters from shore, they could see silver-speckled fish nibble at the bottom, dart away, and feed again.

Wearing only light boots, shorts, and thin shirts, Jale and Cella held each other closely and danced slowly in the light. The world around them could have been platinum and gold — it would have been the same as mud and swamp.

A second later Cella felt something touch the back of her neck. She thought it was Jale's hand, until it tickled and burned.

"Something —," she said, starting to brush it away — but what came away in her hand fluttered and buzzed and was the size of a mouse. She shrieked and bolted sideways, slapping at the place.

Jale saw it — a thing like a mosquito, but huge, with two pairs of black wings, six hooked feet, and a proboscis three centimeters long, red with Cella's blood. It escaped from her hand, circled, and hit her neck again, its grasping feet pulling up bits of her skin as it instantly plunged in its feeder and drank from her.

Though Cella flailed her arms, Jale swept the thing away, hurled it to the ground, and crushed it underfoot.

Already the skin around the punctures was starting to swell.

She whimpered and held her hand over it. "It hurts," she said. "It burns a lot."

"We'll go back." He took her hand. They had had generalized inoculations for such accidents, but procedure in such an occurrence was to take an immediate bioscan.

They had taken no more than a dozen steps, before another one hit Cella in the middle of her back, drawing blood the instant it touched her. Jale swept it away, and they began to run.

He hadn't killed it, and it followed them, circled twice, buzzing noisily, feinted once, then dived and penetrated the skin on Jale's arm above his bicep. He struck at it hard, crushing it into the fabric of his shirt.

Their feet slipped in the not-quite-solid mud, and they were circled by a growing number of the buzzing, black-winged things. Several dived and penetrated Cella simultaneously, in her legs and lower back. She slapped at them, crushing their stiff bodies, while others landed on Jale, on his thighs and shoulders, in the back of his neck, and one gripped into his hair and pierced his scalp. He could hear its rigid proboscis scraping across his skull, searching for a deeper softness.

Gasping for breath, they closed themselves inside the shelter-dome, slumped with their hands on their knees till they could catch their breath. Every one of their wounds pulsed with the beating of their hearts. The welts puffed up and turned purple, and each had an oozing bloody puncture in the center. Cella had seven, Jale five, and blood ran out of his hair in front of his ear.

First they checked themselves with the bioscanner. The readout directed them to mix a 75A-222 formula in the inoculator, enough to make five cc's,

which they then shot into their blood. The swelling and burning grew no worse, and in ten minutes started to reduce.

They were quiet for a while. In the background the counter buzzed steadily, counting the numbers and types of species that moved through the swamp within range of their remote sensors.

"I guess what we did was pretty stupid," Jale said.

"I guess," Cella said breathily.

"Are you all right?"

"I feel light-headed." She went to their unmade bed, climbed into the middle of it, and lay on her stomach.

Jale turned on the bioscanner and moved it around her head, touched the skin register to the side of her sweaty neck. Then he opened up her shirt and moved it around her back. The readout blinked a yellow ⌇⌇⌇, indicating that something was wrong with Cella that it couldn't identify. The procedure was to wait ten minutes and try again.

Cella's eyes closed, and she began breathing slowly, evenly, and sweat rolled off her. It collected in the indentation of her spine in the small of her back.

In ten minutes he scanned her again. And again the reading was the same. At least it didn't indicate that her condition was critical — it still blinked a yellow ⌇⌇⌇ instead of a red one.

Although he was still shaky and had difficulty separating the effects of the insects and medication from his fear, he felt better. So what was wrong with Cella? Before being sent to an outpost, everyone was checked hundreds of different ways, their biochemistry readjusted to minimize alien infections and to respond in standard ways to formula medications — so what was wrong with her?

He checked her again, ten minutes later, and got a yellow ⌇⌇⌇. At least she was sleeping peacefully.

The fourth reading was the same.

Jale slumped at the table by the window and de-opaqued it. The world outside was the same as it had been that morning — brilliant, filled with life, the world where they had danced — but now it filled him with disgust. It was the world that had harmed the one thing that he loved above all things — the one thing that he loved even above himself — and for that, he was unforgiving. Forever unforgiving.

All through the day, he watched her sleep, and every ten minutes he

checked her. Always it was the same yellow ⁂.

Through the night he sat beside her and drank stimulants to stay awake. By morning, when the dome grew warm and the dehumidifier again chugged noisily, his head was swimming, but he never varied his routine. Several times the beeper he had set on a ten-minute cycle startled him out of dozing, but until afternoon he scanned her regularly, every ten minutes, never varying by as much as thirty seconds. Finally, despite the stimulants, he slept for an hour and awakened alarmed, frightened that Cella's condition might have deteriorated.

But it hadn't. By the evening of the second day, the scanner still gave him a flickering yellow ⁂. He took stronger stimulants to stay awake, and through the night, listening to the steady near buzz of the register that counted and cataloged the life-forms that moved through the swamp, he became angrier and more resentful. If Cella died, his life also would be finished. Both of them killed by insects, with one left behind to count out the remaining number of his miserable breaths.

It was the longest, angriest night he had ever spent. Even being fired was nothing next to this; there had been nothing there that he loved.

Hour after hour the scanner gave him a yellow ⁂ reading. Then, just before sunrise, he thought he saw one of the black-winged things creeping across the dome floor toward the bed, its wings twittering, about to take to the air and attack Cella again. He lunged toward it and stomped it a dozen time. But it had been a spot of mud with a few shreds of moss on it. His head pounded, and his eyes glazed.

Midmorning, with the dehumidifier chugging and the register now making a high-pitched buzz, Jale knew what he was going to do. It was a violation of procedure, but he was going to do it anyway because those things had almost killed Cella, and because he was mad.

Wearing only shorts, he stepped outside the dome into the hot, rank air and waited. The swamp was loud with the shrieks of climbing birds, the throaty grumps of calling reptiles, and the ever-present whining buzz of insect life.

"Come on!" he shouted, walking to the middle of the clearing. "Come and get me! Right in the face! Anywhere! I've got a bodyful of hot blood for the taking!"

Seconds later, one of them hit him in the belly, just above his navel, and as it drank from him, he closed his hand around it and squeezed. Its

wings buzzed in his palm a fraction of a moment, and then he crushed it dead.

Once again inside the dome, he carefully moved the bioscanner over the insect, fed the data into the computer, and asked it for a species-specific insecticide. Within seconds, it gave him a formula with a [J-9] prefix, which required that he read and affirm that he would abide by restrictions on its use. He was in the mood to read nothing.

Ten minutes later the autolab dribbled a liter of [J-9] 54-poly-C07 into a small, hand-held sprayer. Several times the autolab screen warned him, "This substance is not to be introduced into the environment," and printed on the sprayer itself were the words, "For in-dome use only."

He checked Cella — same reading again — and slipped into his bodysuit. Before closing his facescreen, he pushed Cella's hair back from her warm forehead and kissed her once. Then he went out and into the jungle.

He returned fifteen minutes later, grimly satisfied, and replaced the empty sprayer in its cabinet. This time when he checked Cella — and it seemed almost as a response to his finally taking action — the scanner gave the simple message, *"Give fluids."*

When he awakened her with a cup of water, she smiled, her eyes bright, and by afternoon she was moving around but feeling a bit weak, and asked if he cared to dance. The scanner said she was well.

THE BODYSUITS stayed in the closet. The next several days, they walked to the river, picnicked there, danced to private music on a grassy bank, fed each other cheese, drank wine from the same glass, made love, and on the third day, there was an unpleasant smell in the air.

"It's over here," Cella said, holding aside a pink-flowered branch as she looked down into a slowly turning pool that the river had cut into the bank.

Along with the river's debris of sticks and leaves were twenty or thirty silver-speckled fish, dead and bloated fat, their rotting flesh crawling with many kinds of flies.

"What do you suppose happened? Jale asked.

"We could ask the computer."

He nodded. "We'll have to picnic somewhere else now."

She let the branch go, and it sprang back, hiding the dead fish from their view. "I like it here," she said.

"But it stinks."

"It doesn't smell that bad. Besides, it's *our* place."

"It smells like dead fish."

If you want to picnic somewhere else, then," she said, "we will."

They stood looking steadily at each other, growing more and more uncomfortable by the instant. Jale finally turned away and went back to where their blanket was spread. "There must be a lot of other nice places," he said, hearing how lame the words sounded in his ears.

"Probably," Cella said quietly. "I'm sure you'll find one," she added, thinking that her words for some reason sounded much angrier than she felt.

They returned to the dome without speaking.

Jale found a grassy swath a few hundred meters downriver — a rolling patch of new grass, sentried by several rough-barked deciduous trees. Here he spread out their blanket. From this place they could look across the smoothly flowing river and listen to the calls of birds and insects.

The first day there, they made love twice, and Cella taught him a song her mother had taught her when she was a child. They sang it slowly and softly in each other's ears as they danced beneath the trees.

If I were a foot, I'd live in a shoe,
If I were a friend, I'd do what you do,
If I were a hand, I'd live in your glove,
If I were a heart, I'd live in your love.

The second day at their new picnic area, before they even spread the blanket, they noticed the rich, sweet smell of something dead. Scattered around the clearing, they found four of the rodentlike mammals, not long dead, swarming with beetles. When they looked further, around the trees and into the surrounding bushes, they found even more, several of them still alive, with their legs twitching and their little jaws quivering — almost, Cella thought, as though they were trying to say something.

"Do you suppose it's some kind of rodent disease?"

"There could be predatory insects that immobilize them and lay their

eggs in them."

They shook their heads. They could only guess.

"We could take one back, scan it, and let the computer figure it out."

"And I guess we'll have to find another place," Cella said, resigned.

Jale said nothing. He gazed at the dead animal.

They sealed one of the dead rodents in a container and returned to the dome. Jale put the container on a shelf behind the scanner and forgot about it.

Several days later, after having located another picnic spot, they stepped out of the dome one bright morning into a sea of swarming, black-shelled beetles. They crunched under their feet, and within an instant were all over their feet and climbing up their legs. Cella screamed, Jale roughly shoved her back into the dome and sealed the door. Still, dozens of the bugs scurried around inside, and it took Jale and Cella half an hour to be satisfied that they had crushed them all.

Outside, they could see the clearing undulate with the beetles piled to a depth of several centimeters. Hot sun glistened off their chitinous backs. They swarmed up the trees, covering the trunks and lower branches till their bodies weighed too heavily on those beneath, and then black cascades of beetles fell to the ground and melted into the heaving surface.

Jale turned to the computer and looked up the designation it had given the beetles. Then they asked it, "Why overpop QL464/A76?"

After a moment of silence, while the machine sorted through the data the scanners had been collecting for the past eight weeks, it said, "There is an imbalance in the prey-predator ratio of QL464/A76."

Jale thought a moment. Then, with growing dread, he asked the machine, "Identify predator for QL464/A76."

"QL568/V5C76," it said.

Jale swallowed, and his dry throat clicked. "Show visual," he said.

An image of the black-winged mosquito-hornet appeared on the screen, along with fine print that explained its habits, habitat, and diet. Primarily, it ate the grubs that developed into the beetles that now swarmed around them.

"I caused the imbalance," Jale whispered.

Cella put her arms around him. "You did it for me," she said. He was

inert in her arms. "You did it because you love me."

"It's all being recorded," he said. "They'll know when they look at the data."

"We still have each other," she said, holding him tighter.

He remembered the rodent they had collected and then had forgotten about. After scanning its soft remains for a moment, the computer gave them a cause of death: "[J-9]54-poly-C07. Origin: Worton Autolab. Ingested in the form of QH367/C82."

"Show visual QH367/C82," he said weakly.

It was the white-bellied fish they had seen dead in the water.

He wanted to know what the fish ate. In a voice barely audible to himself, he said to the machine, "List diet QH367/C82; show visuals."

Half a dozen designations and illustrations rolled up, and one of them was the black-winged insect that had attacked them.

Jale's face looked like death. "The fish ate the poisoned insects, the rodents ate the fish . . . and now, the beetles. I caused this," he said. After a moment he looked at Cella and said, "It was supposed to be a species-specific faunicide."

She said nothing.

"We could be fired again," he said.

She said nothing.

They didn't make love for days, the longest period of abstinence ever.

"You hold it against me, don't you?" she asked.

"No," he said, self-consumed and without interest in her question, which he considered irrelevant.

She thought he was lying to keep from hurting her feelings, and she began to resent his secretly blaming her. After all, she had been unconscious when he had sprayed for the hornets. She had had nothing to do with it. If anyone later was to be fired for this, she didn't think it should be her.

Later in the week, the bright-plumed birds that they had seen before only in the trees now hopped awkwardly around the clearing, scooping up dozens of beetles at a time in their beaks. Several of them grew so heavy with eating that they were overwhelmed by the swarms of beetles and were themselves eaten by their prey.

Over the next weeks, the number of beetles gradually declined as the number of birds increased. The computer informed them that most of these birds were fledglings, and with such an abudnace of food, they grew and matured quickly, and the trees now were filled with brilliant plumes of yellow and blue and red. The entire forest took on a decorated appearance, and the nights were filled with their eerie clucks and screams.

One day — it seemed to happen in just one day, and Jale later thought that if he'd paid attention, he might have witnessed the actual moment —one day there were no more beetles. Four days later the birds, now without food, began to die.

They would perch in the ravaged trees, teetering on the lower branches or hanging by their wing-hooks to the trunks, and when their strength gave out, they would fall limply to the ground to join the other wadded heaps of feathers. Worms ate the bodies and made the feathers tremble, even when there was no breeze. The stench was horrific.

A few days later, several hundred meters away, at the far end of the clearing, they saw what looked like a huge lump of mud that hadn't been there before. Jale looked at it through the telescope, and his face turned white. Cella asked him what was wrong, but he said nothing. When she looked through the scope, she saw the bloated shape of the semireptilian thing. It was on its side, and through gaping rot-holes in its back dropped white worms.

Three and a half weeks later, the computer issued an emergency alert. Cella looked across the dome at Jale. He lay on his cot, staring at the ceiling. Except for response to direct questions, he had been silent for two days.

She stood in front of the computer and said to it, "Announce."

"Within the perception of established scanners, all trees and woody shrubs are dead."

She looked over at Jale without saying anything. His eyes were closed.

"Why?" Cella asked the machine.

"QL464/A76 laid an overabundance of eggs in the bark," it answered, "which consumed the cambium, thus killing all trees and woody shrubs."

"But they don't look dead," she said.

"They will," the machine answered.

"Oh," she said, and wondered what would happen next.

A few days later, eleven weeks after the release of the [J-9] compound, the clearing around the dome erupted with small cones of loose dirt being pushed up from beneath the surface. Then the blind, earth-digging, gopherlike creatures emerged and began gnawing the root clusters of the trees and consuming any green leaf or sprout they found. Quickly, everything was stripped.

After some hours, Jale worked up his nerve to ask the computer what was happening.

"They feed on tree roots, which are now dead. They must come to the surface for alternate food."

Within a few days, Jale and Cella saw the first dead one. They saw it through the window, lying dirty and bloated just outside their door. Day by day, out in the clearing, more of them collapsed and died — of starvation, Cella thought, or from eating what they couldn't digest.

Occasionally now, she and Jale would speak, usually of things they had done when they had been in love. There would be long silences after one of them had spoken. "Remember the river, how the water was so clear we could see fish on the bottom, four or five meters out?" "The air was so clean . . . wasn't it? Remember how we danced?" "There were so many stars in the sky when we made love outside that we had shadows." But they hadn't made love now in more than a month, and the register, over in the corner, clicked only a few times a day.

When a storm blew through, it took down most of the trees, and only the emergency anchoring system saved the dome from being swept to the river in a torrent of mud and debris. After it had passed, their dome sat in a ravaged wasteland of mud pools and shattered trees. No insects buzzed through the air. Nothing skittered across the mud, leaving spidery tracks. No birds sang, and the register was silent.

Without speaking, they gazed at the holocaust for some time. Then Jale said, "Do you still love me?"

It took a long time for her to answer. "I don't know. I guess. I guess I do."

Jale wanted to put his arm around her, but couldn't. He wondered if they would ever dance together again.

Finally the lander came to retrieve them. It settled noisily in the clearing, blowing up clouds of dust from the mud that had baked dry in

the fierce sun. No one said much. Jale and Cella already had packed the equipment and all their belongings, and the only remaining chore was to dismantle the dome, which required less than an hour.

A dark, swarthy man with black eyes, standing near Jale as he cranked out one of the anchor fasteners, said under his breath, "Don't worry about it. This isn't the first world anybody's killed. There're more where this one came from." The man stood up and wiped his face. "Probably get a suspended sentence, fined a month's salary, and sent out again. If you want to be sent out again."

Jale did not feel relieved. More had died than the man could know of.

As they lifted off, Jale looked down at the planet. Where they had been stationed was now a brown blotch, devoid of vegetation, fifty to sixty kilometers wide, with partially dead areas radiating out twice that distance and moving farther every day.

"I did it because I wanted it to be perfect for you," he murmured to Cella, feeling awkward, stoop-shouldered, and stupid, "like the roses."

"Nothing's perfect," she said. She also stared at the receding planet, her eyes squinted against the glare, her one narrow eye nearly shut. "Roses have thorns."



"Is it possible that you're babying him a bit too much?"



SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

STAR BRIGHT

I THINK I once wrote an introduction to one of my pieces about the twelve-year-old kid who wanted to know the second nearest star. I told him Barnard's star, 5.9 light-years away. Then he wanted to know the nearest star. I told him Alpha Centauri, 4.3 light-years away.

Then he told me he thought the Sun was the nearest star.

I always regretted I don't carry a gun. I'd have shot him down — that rotten, wise-guy, snot-nose kid.

Anyway, I'm not going to be caught a second time like that. I want to write a piece on bright stars, and I tell you right now that the brightest star in the sky is the Sun. All right?

Of course, the reason the Sun is so bright is that it's so near to us —149,500,000 kilometers, or 1.57 x 10^{-5} light-years away.

So let's ignore the Sun for now and ask what the brightest star in the sky is that is usually considered a star. (We don't generally think of the Sun as a star.) The answer to that is Sirius, which has a magnitude of -1.42.

Here's how magnitudes work.

About 130 B.C., the Greek astronomer Hipparchus divided the stars into six classes of brightness, which we now refer to as "magnitudes." The brightest stars in the sky are of the "first magnitude"; somewhat dimmer stars are of the "second magnitude"; still dimmer ones of the "third magnitude," then the "fourth magnitude" and the "fifth magnitude" until, finally, the dimmest stars that can be seen with the unaided eye are "sixth magnitude."

The early astronomers counted about twenty stars as being of the first magnitude. Since then, later astronomers have added a few first magnitude stars to the list, stars that were too far south for the ancient astronomers ever to have seen them.

In 1850, an English astronomer, Norman Robert Pogson, suggested that magnitudes be made more exact. If the average first-magnitude star is one hundred times as bright as the average sixth-magnitude star, and if we go down the magnitude list in five equal steps (1 to 2, 2 to 3, 3 to 4, 4 to 5, and 5 to 6) then we can suppose that a star of one magnitude is 2.512 times as bright as the star of the next dimmer magnitude. This is because five 2.512's multiplied together are equal to just about 100.

We can also calculate how much change in brightness is equal to a tenth of a magnitude or even a hundredth of a magnitude. Thus, if a first-magnitude average is set equal to 1.00, one can measure the brightness of each star and find some particular star to have a magnitude of 1.78, another of 3.91, or 5.09, and so on.

With the invention of the telescope and the increasing ability to see stars that are too dim, even far too dim, to see with the unaided eye, we have stars that are of the 7th magnitude, the 8th, all the way down to the 20's.

Since the value of 1.00 is taken as the average for the first-magnitude stars, those brighter than average must have a magnitude of less than 1. A brighter than average first-magnitude star may have a magnitude of 0.59, for instance. If a star is particularly bright, the magnitude may be even less than zero, thus forcing astronomers to move into negative numbers.

That is why Sirius has a magnitude of -1.42.

However, Sirius is not the brightest object in the sky. There are three planets that are, at times, brighter than Sirius. Mars at its brightest has a magnitude of -2.02; Jupiter, one of -2.55; and Venus one of -4.22. Venus when it is at its brightest is about 12.6 times as bright as Sirius.

Then there is the Moon, and when it is at the full and is brightest, it has a magnitude of -12.73, so that it delivers about 2,500 times as much light as Venus does, or 31,500 times as much as Sirius does.

And finally, there is the Sun, with a magnitude of -26.91, so it delivers about 470,000 times as much light as the full Moon does and a little over a billion times as much as Venus does.

Nevertheless, let us eliminate the Sun, the Moon, and brightest planets and get back to Sirius.

Why is Sirius so bright? Well, for one thing, it's quite close to us, only 8.63 light-years away. If it were farther away, it wouldn't look as bright.

Nor is closeness the only answer. The star Alpha Centauri is closer

to us than Sirius is; it is only 4.27 light-years away, and yet Alpha Centauri has a magnitude of -0.27, so that it is only about one-third as bright as Sirius.

The answer is how bright the two stars are. Alpha Centuri is just about as bright as the Sun. Sirius, on the other hand, is about 23 times as bright as the Sun.

Obviously, then, in judging the brightness of a star, we must know first how far it is and second how "luminous" it is. For instance, Barnard's star is only 5.9 light-years away from us, but it is so non-luminous (only 0.00036 times as bright as the Sun) that even at that close distance, we can't see it without a telescope.

For that reason, astronomers have worked out a quantity called the "absolute magnitude." This is not the magnitude as a star appears in the sky, but is the magnitude that would exist if every star were at a fixed distance.

The fixed distance is 10 parsecs, where a parsec is equal to 3.26 light-years, so that the stars would be 32.6 light-years away.

Suppose, for instance, the Sun were ten parsecs away from us. It would shine with a magnitude of about 4.7. That would be its absolute magnitude. If Sirius were ten parsecs away, it would have a magnitude of 1.3. It would still be a first-magnitude star, but it would be appreciably dimmer than it is now because it would be farther away, at ten parsecs, than it is in reality when it is only a quarter of a parsec away.

Now, you see, we can really ask a question — not what is the brightest star in the sky in appearance, but what is the brightest star in our neighborhood in actuality? (We have to confine ourselves to stars in our own neighborhood, for there may be far distant stars that are brighter still, but which are too far away for us to be able to study them in detail.)

If, then, we consider only the stars within 1,000 light-years of ourselves, we come across the star Rigel.

Rigel is a star in the constellation of Orion, the Hunter. It is located where the foot of the Hunter is usually pictured, and "Rigel" is from the Arabic word for "foot."

Rigel would seem to be an ordinary first-magnitude star, with a magnitude of 0.14 — the seventh brightest star in the sky. There is a catch, though. Rigel is about 850 light-years away from us, much farther than any other first-magnitude star. Yet even at that distance it is first-magnitude.

This means that it has an enormous luminosity. Personally, I find a different figure for it in every

reference book I consult, but I have an article on the subject that has just been published, and it gives Rigel an absolute magnitude of -9.9, so that it is nearly a million times as luminous as the Sun. If Rigel were ten parsecs away from us, it would shine with about 100 times the brightness of Venus.

Rigel has a mass about 25 times that of the Sun, and it stretches out over a diameter of 65 times that of the Sun. If Rigel were in the Sun's place, it would almost fill the orbit of Mercury.

Rigel would not be nearly as large as a red giant, such as Betelgeuse or Antares, but it would be much hotter. Wheras a red giant is cool (that's why it is red) Rigel is a blue-white star with a surface twice as hot as that of our Sun.

Rigel can't possibly have planets with intelligent life on them or, indeed, planets with any form of life. Not only is Rigel so hot that planets must circle it at enormous distances to be cool enough for life — but there is something worse.

Rigel has an internal temperature of 100 million degrees as compared to 15 million for the temperature at the center of our Sun.

In order for Rigel to maintain that temperature, it must be consuming hydrogen at an enormous rate. Even though it has 25 times as much hydrogen as the Sun has, the rate of consumption is such that Rigel would use up its supply far, far sooner than the Sun does.

Whereas our Sun will continue to burn at an ordinary rate for billions of years, Rigel will remain as it is for no more than a million years or so; then with its hydrogen content decreased, it will expand to a red giant and collapse in a blaze of supernovahood.

This means that whereas our Sun has supplied a decent amount of heat and light for five billion years now and will certainly continue to do so for another five billion, Rigel can do nothing of the sort. The Sun has time for its planets (or for one of them, anyway) to develop life and even intelligent life. Rigel has no chance of doing any such thing.

Rigel, unlike our Sun, does not shine in single blessedness. (Few stars do.)

Back in the 1830's, the German-Russian astronomer Friedrich G. W. von Struve spotted a star nearby Rigel.

The star, Rigel B, is about 625 billion kilometers from Rigel A, or about 200 times as far as Pluto is from our Sun. Since the discovery of Rigel B, it has been observed to be moving along with Rigel A, and this makes astronomers think the two stars are gravitationally bound.

Of course, they should be circling each other, but at a distance of 625 billion kilometers, the orbital movement is very slow.

In 1908, a Canadian astronomer, John Stanley Plaskett, reported that Rigel might be a very close binary star. He noticed that the spectral lines shifted regularly from a movement toward the red to a movement toward the blue. This made it seem that Rigel was advancing toward us slightly and then receding from us and doing so in regular fashion.

A logical explanation for such a phenomenon is to suppose that Rigel is circling another star very close to itself, so that the orbital motion carries it toward us and away from us. The second star would be a dim one and would not be seen against the blaze of Rigel itself.

However, Plaskett seems to have been wrong. In all the years since 1908, despite the improvement of instruments, no close companion star to Rigel has been detected. But, in that case, why does Rigel move in and out, so to speak. Apparently, the outer atmosphere of Rigel pulses, and that is what produces the effect.

In 1937, however, it turned out that Rigel B was a close binary star. This time there seems no question, for the spectral lines of both stars were seen and they orbit each other every ten days.

Both companion stars are distinctly brighter than the Sun. Rigel B is 100 times as luminous as the Sun, and Rigel C is 50 times as luminous.

It strikes me that if there is a planet that circles Rigel C, it would probably see three suns in the sky, not stars, but suns (shades of my story "Nightfall").

Rigel is such a brilliant star and is so hot at its core that it apparently emits puffs of matter in an irregular fashion. Some of it seems to fall back to the star, but some keeps on going. If Rigel were located where the Sun is, some of these puffs would carry gas to Jupiter's orbit in a month. As a result of these puffs Rigel is losing about 1/100 of its mass in a million years.

The star that burst in a supernova in the Large Magellanic Cloud in 1987 was a lot like Rigel, only worse. It gave off larger puffs and ejected a great deal of mass. Rigel apparently isn't sufficiently extreme to become a supernova just yet, however.

The Italian astronomer Pietro Angelo Secchi was the first to suggest that stars be divided into classes based on their spectral appearance. Between 1864 and 1868, he studied the spectra of 4000 stars

and found there were marked differences between them. He therefore divided the stars into four classes.

As time went on, they were divided into more classes. Originally, they were to be listed in order of the alphabet but, again, as time went on, this was found to be inadequate. Right now, the stars are divided into the following classes: O, B, A, F, G, K, M, R, N, and S.

The order is remembered without trouble by means of the following mnemonic: "Oh, Be A Fine Girl. Kiss Me Right Now, Sweetheart." The last three items, R, N, and S, refer to rather unusual stars and are generally ignored.

Of the remainder, the spectral classes give the order of luminosity, from O, which is the most luminous, to M, which is the least. In general, the number of such stars increases with dimness so that the brightest stars, O, are the least numerous and M, the dimmest stars, are most numerous.

Thus, our Sun is a G-type star, and about 10 percent of the stars in our Galaxy are G's. F-stars are more luminous than the G-stars and there are fewer of them. About 3 percent of the stars in the Galaxy are F's. About 1 percent are A's and about 0.1 percent are B's.

Only one star out of every 25,000 in the Galaxy is an O-type. Even so, there may be as many as 10,000,000 O-stars in the Galaxy. We are not very aware of them because most of them are so far away we see them only as dim objects, if at all. Some are hidden by dust clouds and some are hidden by clouds of their own making for they give off matter in great quantities. The brilliance of Rigel, though it is not an O-star, arises from the fact that of all the stars that are B or O, it is the closest.

For instance, there is an O-type star that is so far away, it doesn't even have a name but only a catalog number. It is Cygnus OB2 #12. Its absolute magnitude is -9.9 so that it is as luminous as Rigel. This star, however, is in a cloud of dust that dims it 10,000-fold so that it doesn't seem anywhere near as luminous as it ought to be.

Then there is a star called HD 93129A, which radiates a great deal of its light in the ultra-violet, which is, of course, invisible to us. If all the light it radiates, ultra-violet and all, were lumped together, it would have an absolute magnitude of -12, which would make it more than six times as luminous as Rigel and about 5 million times as luminous as the Sun. It happens to be 11,000 light-years away so that you need a telescope to see it, but if you put it at the standard distance of 32.6 light-years, it would rival our full Moon

in brightness.

The bright B and O stars often shine in association. That is, there are a number of them that are moderately close together. The notion is that they all formed out of one gigantic cloud of dust and gas and that ordinarily they would drift apart. They have not had time to do so, however, for their lifetimes are very short.

A B-star is liable to exist on the main sequence for ten million years (as compared with 12 billion years for our Sun). An O-star might last on the main sequence for less than a million years.

That is why there are so few of these extremely bright stars. In the first place they have to form out of enormous dust clouds, and these don't exist in great numbers. In the second place, once they are formed, they don't remain as they are very long, but, relatively quickly, explode as supernovas.

Let's move to the other end of the star classification, the very dim stars.

There is always the impression that what one sees (or detects) is what exists and nothing else need be worried about.

For instance, for thousands of years, human beings looked at the stars and felt that only those stars they could see existed. A star that was too dim to see was a contradiction in terms. What good was it if you couldn't see it? Why should God bother to create it?

Of course, with the invention of the telescope, we discovered that there were innumerable stars we could *not* see with the unaided eye.

The situation may be similar in the case of the stars of different spectral classes. The dimmest stars we can make out are those of the M-classification, and so it is taken for granted that these are the dimmest stars there are.

Not necessarily so!

You have dust clouds forming the stars, and the smallest dust clouds are the most common. They form the M-stars. But what about dust clouds that are smaller still. It is a mistake to think that everything stops just because that's all we can see.

Still smaller dust clouds will form still smaller stars, and these "sub-M stars" (my own name) would be far more numerous than the M's themselves. They would be so small indeed that they would not have enough mass to set up a fusion reaction at their center. At least, they wouldn't set up the hydrogen-hydrogen fusion reaction that powers all the stars we see.

It might be that they would set up subsidiary systems of creating energy — in very small amounts —

and would, if they shone at all, do so just barely.

These barely-shining dwarf stars are called "brown dwarfs" because they are barely red-hot. Astronomers are searching for them. After all, if they exist in large numbers, they may add significantly to the mass of the Universe and, in effect, explain, at least in part, the "mystery of the missing mass."

For another, they would help us understand how stars are formed.

Unfortunately, however, astronomers have not yet made a clear discovery of brown dwarfs.

As I said earlier, stars brighter than G-type don't last long enough to give rise to planets on which life has time to form beyond the bacterial stage at the most.

What about moving in the other direction and going on toward the K and M stars. The K stars can last on the main sequence about 25 billion years, and the M stars can last, easily, 100 billion years. They are small and don't have much hydrogen, but they dribble it out very slowly, you see.

Surely, they have plenty of time to develop planets that can in turn develop life. Some of the large K's may actually do so, for all we know.

The trouble with K and M stars is that they are cool stars, and, in order for a planet to be suitable for life as we know it (in order for it to have liquid water, for instance), it must exist fairly close to the star.

It can do so, but as a planet gets closer and closer to a star, the tidal effect increases very rapidly, and once it is close enough, it ends up facing one side to the star, just as the Moon faces one side to us.

A planet facing its star steadily gets to be hot on that side, even if the star is comparatively cool. The night side is, of course, extremely cold. The planet is therefore simply unsuitable for life.

This is a shame, for together, the K and M stars make up 7/8 of all the stars in the Galaxy.

That leaves us with the G-stars as a possible abode of life. There are about 200,000,000,000 stars in the Galaxy, and if the G-stars make up 10 percent of them, that means there are still 20,000,000,000 stars capable of producing life.

Of course, a great deal depends on the location of the stars. We now know that the center of the Galaxy (where most of the stars are located) is a place of enormous energies and violence which life could not withstand. A G-star would have to be located in the suburbs, in the spiral arms and nowhere near the center — as in fact our own Sun is located.

As it happens, about 10 percent of all the stars are to be found in

the spiral arms, so that still leaves 2,000,000,000 G-stars in the spiral arms.

But then, of course, a star that is suitable for the development of life may be a binary star, which precludes a proper orbit for a planet circling one of the Suns. Or even if it is a single star, it may simply not have a planet that is in the proper range, that is close enough to the Sun to have liquid water and far enough away so that the water is not boiling.

Our own Sun has nine planets, several dozen satellites and uncounted bodies of other size and, of them all, only Earth exists under conditions that make life possible. We would have to assume that most G-type stars, however well-located, simply don't develop a planet suitable for life.

Let us suppose (a pure guess) that only one such star out of a hundred will develop the necessary planet. In that case, there will still be 20,000,000 G-stars with a useful planet circling them.

It is my belief that any planet that possesses the physical and chemical attributes that make life possible on it, will quickly develop that life. We only know one example of this, Earth itself, but it began to develop life almost as soon as Earth stopped being bombarded by huge meteorites.

There is a catch, though. Life is life, but it is not intelligence. How long would it take a planet to develop intelligent life, to develop a technological civilization?

Again, we only know one example of this, our own, and the fact is that life existed on Earth for at least 3.5 billion years and intelligent life (at least life capable of producing art and useful inventions) only about 50,000 years ago. Our technological civilization is only a couple of centuries old.

Under the circumstances, it does not seem likely to me that the Galaxy, though full of life, is necessarily full of civilizations. Still, there may be hundreds in existence, perhaps even thousands.

I don't think any of them will be coming here. There are scientists who think that, little by little, a civilization that is in existence will explore the Galaxy, and the fact that none have reached us in our history is an indication that such civilizations don't exist.

I don't believe this. I think that civilizations are thousands of light-years apart and that they are not going to try to cover such distances just to reach us — or even just to explore. I do think, however, that messages may be sent out, if we would only learn to detect them.

Astronomers are interested in SETI ("Search for Extra-Terrestrial

Intelligence"). It would cost a lot of money, and the chances of coming up with something useful is virtually zero. So why bother?

Well, 1) Astronomers would have to build new forms of radio telescopes to do the job, and it would always be useful to have new devices, even if they do not do the job for which they are designed.

2) In searching for messages, then, even if we don't find them, we are certain to come across all sorts of things that we now have no notion exists. Pulsars and quasars were discovered serendipitously and not because anyone was looking for them.

3) If we do detect what seem to us to be messages, then the chances are that we will not be able to interpret them. Even so, it would be interesting to see that the messages exist, that a civilization more advanced than our own is to be found in the Galaxy, and that it has not succeeded in destroying itself. After all, we are on the point of destroying ourselves, and the discovery that this is not necessary might be a cheering matter.



"The Mystery Spot" is the sequel to Mike Conner's wonderful "Guide Dog" which appeared in our May 1991 issue. In "Guide Dog," the young protagonist worked as a guide for a famous and beloved alien artist named Henry. "The Mystery Spot" takes a look at what happens after Henry's tragic death.

THE MYSTERY SPOT

By Mike Conner

THE YEAR AFTER HENRY died, I was working at a tourist attraction called the Mystery Spot near the resort town of Haven. It wasn't much, as attractions went. There was a parking lot, a souvenir shop, and the cabin where Irene and Gordy, the old couple who owned the place, lived.

Haven was on the coast, and we were in the mountains up above it. We got plenty of tourists. Everyone who came to Haven wanted to see the Spot. It was especially popular because the fliers — whose world this was — never went near it. In fact, in all the years Gordy and Irene had owned the place, they had seen only two of them. One was Henry, whom I had worked for as a guide. The other was Henry's business manager, who had brought me here. And Business Manager had come to the Spot with Henry on a painting trip a long time ago.

He must have figured his people would never go after me here. And he was right, too, because they never came.

Maybe something about the Spot kept them away. Or maybe they had forgotten all about me. See, we don't mean much to them. There are thousands of us living on their world, and we have cities of our own now, and homes and businesses, but they hardly know we exist. Oh, sometimes they pay attention. Like when they put me on trial for murdering their favorite painter: Henry, who had been my client, and my best friend.

Generally it rains every night in these hills. Then it lets up in the morning, and around eight I'll walk in from my tiny cabin up the draw. It's quiet close to the Spot. No birds call. There are no insects. Most animals avoid the place altogether.

On the way in, I'd hear Dwayne's truck. He had an ATV with a turbine engine that howled like a beast on six huge wheels. Dwayne kept his surfboards and a dirt bike chained to the bed. He was a real resorter who'd lived in Haven all his life and had a permanent, baked-in tan.

This particular morning, Dwayne drove into the lot backward. He came roaring right at me out of the shadows. But I stood in there. He hit his brakes just before he hit me and scudded between the painted lines.

"Dude, you're lazy!" he said, popping out holding his lunch bag.

"Morning, Dwayne," I said.

"That what it is?" He yawned and stretched his arms. "I am hella stiff. Had a hard night." He punched at me, but I slipped it. Dwayne shook his head disgustedly.

"Dawg, you are the laziest man I've ever met. Man, are you lazy!"

We went into the gift shop. You could buy agate earrings there, and key chains and Mystery Spot T-shirts. There were also reproductions of the painting Henry had done when he had visited here 30 years ago. It was called *The Well of Loneliness*. Gordy and Irene had the original hanging in their living room.

Irene had just brewed a pot of coffee, and Gordy was putting some split wood into the stove. It was a cold morning. Both of them were bundled up.

"Morning, boys," Irene said. "How you doing?"

"I'm stiff," Dwayne said. He took the newspaper off the counter and sat down in the chair by the stove and opened it up. "Got anything to eat?"

"I do. I got cookies. But you're going to have to earn 'em."

I poured myself some coffee. It was real coffee.

"Mmmm," I said.

"Like that, hon? It's off the *Stella*. They brought our order."

"Uh-oh," Dwayne said.

"Hush! We got some real good stuff this time." Irene looked over Dwayne's shoulder at the paper. "Now, why are you reading bike ads?"

"Cause I'm gonna buy one."

"You just got your license back!"

"Got it back to use, Reeny." Dwayne snapped the pages and folded them back. Irene picked up the front section.

"Look at that. It says the Pennebakers are on board the *Stella*, too."

Dwayne looked up. "The *Pennebakers*!"

"They're gonna hold a Revival right here in Haven. I'm thinking of going."

"Oh Lord!" Dwayne dropped to his knees in front of her and folded his hands. "Help me, Jesus!"

Irene laughed and swatted at his head with the paper.

"Sweet Jesus, hit me again. I wanna walk! I wanna *fly*!"

"You better stop that blaspheming, Dwayne. You don't know what-all might happen to you out there today."

"You could drop dead," Gordy observed. "Ye know not the hour."

"I know *ye* talk funny."

Irene whacked him with the paper again. Then she went behind the counter and brought out a round metal tin. "Here're real chocolate chip cookies. Gordy made 'em last night. If you two behave yourself, we're thinking of having a little party tonight. Now, you get out there and get to work. We're gonna be real busy today, with the *Stella* and all."

Dwayne and I filled buckets with soapy water and disinfectant and took brushes and cleaned out the rest rooms. Then we raked, and swept the needles and leaves off the paths. We worked our way up the hill toward the Spot. Down below, Irene pulled water off the tops of tables and the benches with a squeegee.

By the time we finished and unlocked the gates, the sun had come out. Steam began to curl from the soaked trunks of the trees. For a few minutes, everything was warm and peaceful. Dwayne took his shirt off and lay faceup on the path in a patch of sun. I went into the ticket booth.

Gordy had his headphones on, listening to Earth music. He let me by, and I went into the tiny dressing room to put on my gear for the show.

I had my old gloves and pads and the saddle from my guide harness, minus the power pack, grab bar, and translator. I'd left the stirrups on and taped some foam inside them to protect my kidneys. Dwayne had got me a helmet and visor from a surf shop in town.

After I got the gear on, I stretched and ran some sprints along the path to the rest rooms. The first bus had pulled into the lot. The door opened, and the tourists spilled out, wandering around looking up at the trees.

"Here they come, Gordy," I said. He was counting postcards into stacks of ten to give to the groups. He fastened each stack with a rubber band. "Want me to take 'em up?"

"There's another bus due," Gordy said. "Let's let the folks browse down in the shop a little."

"O.K., Gord." I went over to wait by the turnstile. Dwayne was reading the paper again.

"How's a twin-coil Kawi import sound, Dawg? Only seven grand?"

"Where are you ever going to get seven grand, Dwayne?"

"I've got half of it now. And you never know. The rest of it could step out of one of those buses. I mean, look at those guys! They're rolling in dough." He shoved a stalk of grass into the corner of his mouth.

"Dumb bastards, too," he said. I looked at him, and he looked back at me. Dwayne's helmet was orange with black tiger stripes painted on the sides. Mine was lime green with a spiral on the top. We had flipped-up gold visors. We both started to laugh at the same time.

"Hell. Everybody is," Dwayne said.

Another bus arrived, and the tourists all came up. There were maybe forty people altogether. You could pick out the locals right away. They were the sturdy ones. Their clothes looked like they had been washed many times, and you could see them trying not to look enviously at the off-worlders.

How could you help it though? Things had really changed for our people since my parents had settled here. Back on Earth, there was prosperity, and now the off-world visitors had plenty of money. They were here on vacation. They hadn't been forced to ship off in order to scrape out a living on some rock.

Sure, they gloated about it. See? — the tourists seemed to say — *we* were the smart ones. We stuck it out. Look at what you could have had if you'd just stayed home a little longer. . . .

DWAYNE AND I worked the tours as a team. He did most of the talking. He had a good line of patter, and he could be awfully charming. He was not charming today, though. Today that low-level contempt people who grow up in resort towns have for tourists was showing through. So Dwayne treated them like cattle, herding them up the path to the little grandstand below the shed that covered the Spot. When he got everyone up there, he pulled his visor down and stood there with his hands on his hips.

"Welcome to the Mystery Spot, the place that Nature forgot. My name is Dwayne Nelson. This is my partner, G.D." Dwayne began to rattle off the story about the loggers who had been thrown off the hill by the force of the Spot, and the fliers being afraid of the place, and how all the trees and plants grew up twisted here. Then he drew out a level from a pocket on his pants leg. In front of the grandstand were a pair of parallel concrete slabs. Dwayne laid the level across them.

"O.K., now you see the bubble is perfectly centered. I've got a board here, too. I lay it across, and —" He bent down and put the board next to the level. I took a ball out of my pocket and put it on the board. The ball did not move.

"Now, if there were any difference at all in elevation between those two slabs, that ball would roll right off that board," Dwayne said.

"Not necessarily."

"What?"

A young man stepped forward. "I said, not necessarily. How do we know what kind of ball that is? It could have a metal core. You could have a magnet hidden inside that board."

"Believe me, pal, we're not that clever here. You want tricks, go see the Pennebakers tomorrow night."

A couple of people laughed. The young man's eyes narrowed. "Is that so?"

"Yeah." Dwayne was looking around. "But hey, you're welcome to examine the ball. Cut it in half if you want., The ball isn't the point. The point is —look, is that your girlfriend over there?"

"She's my sister."

"O.K. You and your sister come and stand on these slabs."

They came over, and Dwayne positioned them facing each other.

"You're taller than she is. Her eyes are lined up about at your nose. Everybody see that?"

People nodded and murmured yes.

"O.K. Now change places."

The murmurs became gasps of surprised laughter.

"Looks like she's got about three inches on you now."

"She doesn't look any different to me," the young man said.

"Who *is* this guy! People, is she taller or not?"

"Taller!"

"Well, *I* don't see it."

"O.K. Here, G.D. You stand up there." Dwayne grabbed my arm and pulled me onto the slab. I found myself standing face-to-face with the girl.

I really had not looked at her before. She was just one of the tourists who came in by the busload. But now she smiled at me, and I felt my face get warm. She had red-brown hair and green eyes.

"Excuse me?" she said.

"Huh?"

"I think your friend wants us to change places."

"Oh!"

That got a laugh. I hustled around to switch, and people gasped again as our height seemed to change. The girl's eyes were still in the same place, though. Right on mine.

"I still say it's a trick!" the young man insisted. "An optical illusion. Because of how the hillside is."

Dwayne ignored him. "Folks, come on up to the Spot. G.D. and I have a few things to show you that are beyond explanation. Please be aware that people sometimes get pretty dizzy up there. So step carefully and use the handrails."

The girl smiled and stepped off the pad and joined her brother.

"Man, I hate that guy," Dwayne said. "Skeptics! They just can't let themselves have a good time."

"Her sister seemed to believe you, all right," I said.

"You like the sister?"

"I didn't say I liked her. But she is awfully good-looking," I said.

Dwayne gave me an amazed grin. "Dawg, that's the first time I ever heard you say anyone was good-looking."

"Oh, get off it," I said, but he was right.

The Mystery Spot was covered by a log shed that was set traversely into the hillside. It was built perpendicular to the grade, but when you went inside and tried to stand up straight, you found yourself leaning away from, rather than into, the hill. On the downhill side of the shed, there was a long, padded rail. Dwayne and I lined the tour up against it. Then I took my position at one end of the shed, and Dwayne at the other.

"Now, you feel something strange here, right?" Dwayne said. "But if you throw something, you'll *see* it, too." He tossed me a tennis ball. It arced up to the roof, and I had to jump to get it. I threw it backhand toward the floor. The ball dipped and then curved up.

We started throwing back and forth. Dwayne threw sidearm and over the top. He got that ball twisting and turning, and finished with a throw between his legs that looped right around behind me.

"Now, balls aren't the only things that fly in here," Dwayne said.

That was my cue. If you closed your eyes here, you felt panic almost like standing at the edge of a cliff in a strong wind. But if you fought that off and just relaxed and let it take you, you could actually jump from one end of the shed to the other. What Dwayne and I did was launch ourselves, pick up the pace, and bounce back and forth. You had to get ready and prepare yourself if it was going to work right, and the ball tossing was our way of locking in the rhythm. Dwayne always made the last toss and gave me the cue. I always caught the last throw, dropped the ball, and pushed off.

I had done it so many times I hardly had to think about it, but today I happened to look at the rail, and there was that girl looking at me. All of a sudden, I was thinking of her while I was in the air. I tumbled sideways right into Dwayne, and we both hit the deck.

"*Oooffff!*" Dwayne said. He groaned and flailed and tried to sit up. I guess it looked a lot worse than it really was, because some of the people at the rail tried to come over and help. All of a sudden, they were bouncing off the walls. In a few seconds, that shed looked like the inside of a popcorn popper.

Dwayne got his breath and pulled himself up. People were yelling and flying around.

"*Hold it!*" he yelled. "Stop!" Dwayne had a good amount of command in his voice. Everyone just kind of settled to the ground.

"O.K. We're going to help all of you back to the rail. You all right, Dawg?"

"Yeah."

"I still say it's some kind of trick," the young man muttered to his sister.

"Oh Rob, be quiet."

"Yeah, Rob," Dwayne said. "Shut up."

At the end of the day, when the last bus had gone, and the sun had disappeared behind the ridge, you could see lights burning in the windows of the gift shop. Gordy locked the gates and took the cashbox inside the shop so Irene could count the day's receipts. We went in, too.

"Dawg stank up there today," Dwayne said, pulling off his gloves. "Ran into me, Gordy. Did I tell you that?"

"Three times."

"Well, I think I busted a rib," Dwayne said.

"That's too bad," Irene said, looking up from the cash in front of her. "Guess you'll miss our party."

"Oh. The *party*."

"Gordy's cooking, ain't you, hon?"

"Yup. Real Earth stuff. Mexican food."

"What's Mexican food?"

"Oh, you know. Beans. Tortillas."

"Tor-*tee*-yas!" Dwayne repeated. O.K., what time?"

"Nine."

"Mind if I bring some people?"

"What about your ribs?"

"I'll bring those, too," Dwayne said.

A little after nine, I went over to Gordy and Irene's. Halfway there you could smell the food. Then the noise started. Gordy had his music going pretty loud. He had a couple of radio dishes spread out on the ridgetops to pick up stuff from Earth. For years, all kinds of signals had been leaking out from there — signals that were just beginning to reach us here. Gordy's favorite was something called "rock."

When I came in, Gordy was stepping around the braided rug. He had a big smile on his face. The cabin was packed with people, and the music rattled all the knickknacks and china things Irene had everywhere.

"Hi, hon!" Irene yelled across the room when she saw me.

"What?" I yelled back. It was hard to hear with the music.

"Wild thing, I think you groove me," Gordy was singing.

Ba dee da dummmm—

"But I wanna know for sure."

Ba dee da dummmm—

"Come on, hold me tight!"

Ba dee da dooommmm—

"I *luuuv* yew!" Gordy yelled, and Irene shrieked with laughter. Everybody was dancing.

"I had only about half of this before," Gordy said to me above the noise. "'Wild Thing.' Golly!"

Irene was waving at me to come over. But there were too many people. I had been feeling funny all day, and I was lying in bed in the dark before I came, and now I wished I never had. Even worse, I had been lying there trying not to think about Henry, and there was that painting he'd done here hanging on the wall behind Irene. I shrugged at her and tried to smile, and then she was kind of swallowed up. I thought, well, maybe I can slip away, and I turned around and ran right into Dwayne.

He was wearing a dark suit with baggy pants, a white shirt, and white sneakers. "G.D.!" he said. "Have an Earth beer!" He shoved a bottle into my hand.

"Where'd you get this?"

"*I* have been hanging out with the rich. Say! What's the long face for? Things are looking up, G.D.! Look who I brought."

He steered my shoulders around and pointed me at the girl from the tour.

"Tracked her down for you. Turns out Audrey's one of the *Stella* kids. So's her brother."

"He's here? I thought you hated him."

"I do. But they're a duo or something. Hang on." And he went and brought the girl over.

"Audrey, I'd like you to meet my partner, G.D. G.D., Audrey. O.K., you're on your own!" He left us, and I felt my face getting warm again.

"Isn't he polite," she said.

"Sure is." I had to look at her. They were the same eyes, all right.

"Is this your place?"

"No."

"Oh," She nodded and looked around.

"Whose place it is?"

"Gordy and Irene's. They're over by the kitchen."

"So all these little teeny china dogs don't belong to you?"

"No, they don't," I said grimly.

She had been smiling. Now she blushed.

"Is something wrong?" she said.

"No," I said. "Excuse me." And I left.

Outside the wind had picked up. It had a galvanized smell to it now. The sky was a funny color, too. It was good to get out of the party, though. Still, I did not want to go home. I shoved my hands into my pockets, hopped the fence, and went up to the Mystery Spot to calm down and try to think a little.

I SAT IN the shed for a long gime, listening to the storm pick up. After a while the wind began to push through the cracks in the walls, and the light bulb swung on its wire, and I commenced feeling light-headed and tingly, like there were snaps of static electricity in my hair.

I was feeling awfully low. And I couldn't figure a reason, either. I mean, a whole year had gone by since Henry had crashed into the side of that hill. And sure, I was sad about it, but never like this. So why now? Why did I feel like it all just happened yesterday?

Maybe it's this storm, I thought. It had been stormy like this the night Business Manager brought me here. I remembered how frightened Irene looked when she answered the door. Gordy told me later on that she'd been scared to death of the fliers ever since she was a little girl. But Irene took one look at me and said I could stay. After that, Business Manager said I'd be all right, and flew away. And I was all right: I began working at the Spot right away, and made friends with Gordy and Irene and Dwayne, and I was fine.

So why now? It was like Henry had come back from the dead wanting me to do something. Only, he wouldn't tell me what it was.

The lightning was green, and it made the trees jump out and hide again in the darkness. I thought that I had better get home before it got much worse. Then I heard music and a lot of talking, and looked out a window and saw Dwayne heading up the path. He had the party with him. I cursed and tried to get out the back, but they were coming up that way, too. They all just piled in and started knocking around. Dwayne stood up on the wall. Then he saw me.

"Partner!" he yelled. "G.D.! Where you been?"

I couldn't have answered if I had wanted to. The lightning flashed, followed right away by a tremendous thunderclap. Dwayne was saying something to Rob. Then he put his little fingers in the corners of his mouth and whistled.

"Listen, everybody! Robby here says he *still* doesn't believe in the Mystery Spot!"

"No!" people called out.

"He doesn't believe that nothing touches this place. Not even lightning! Well, *Rob*, I bet I can climb that tree and be perfectly safe."

"Big deal."

"Big deal? Come up with me, then, Robby boy."

"Why should I —," Rob began, before another blast of thunder drowned him out. His expression dissolved into a slow smile. "O.K.," he said. "How much you want to bet?"

"Thirty-five hundred."

"You got it. But you have to stay up there ten minutes."

"You're on, dude!"

Dayne got down from the wall and went outside. The wind was whipping the trees around against the bright, racing clouds. I caught up with him.

"Come on, man, forget it!" I said.

"Are you kidding? Thirty-five hundred more, and I'll have enough for that bike. Give me a boost!"

"Uh-uh."

"Fine." He pointed at somebody. "Hey, you! Get me started up here!" A couple of people put their hands together and helped him up.

Dwayne started climbing. In a few seconds, you could see him only when the lightning flashed. He climbed quickly at first, then he stopped. I saw him halfway up the twisted trunk of the tree, looking tired and uncertain, and I thought, if anything happens to him, Irene would just about kill herself. So I grabbed hold of the trunk, slippery now with the rain that had just started, and shinnied up after him. This kind of climbing had been part of my guide training, and I was good at it. It wasn't long before I reached him. I grabbed the branch above, swung up, then pulled Dwayne into the crook to rest.

"Man," he puffed, "thanks. I forgot what a bitch it is to climb a tree!"

The tree bent in the wind and whipped back. Then came another lightning bolt, so close it seared a line across the inside of my eyeballs.

"That's it. We're going down."

"No way!" He started climbing again.

"Dwayne!"

But he was on his way. There were more branches closer to the top, and he had an easier time now. I followed him. In a couple of minutes, we were both wedged in a notch up at the crown of the tree, holding on while the wind blew us back and forth crazily, and the lightning struck all around.

"Whooo!" Dwayne yelled. "This is awesome!"

"Who told you lightning never struck the Spot?"

Dwayne looked at me with his face wet and his hair blown back.

"Nobody," he said, and grinned.

In the morning after the storm had let up, I put my rain gear on and started to work, feeling stiff and slow and out-of-sorts. When I got there, the gates were locked. Irene was waiting for me on her porch.

"What's going on?" I said.

"That storm took out part of the bridge on Range Line. Looks like we get a couple days off."

"You mean we're closed?"

"No way in the world for anyone to get here, hon. Leastways by bus. Folks sure as heck aren't going to walk five miles to pay five dollars, either."

"I guess not."

"Feeling better today?"

"Sure," I said. "Everybody get home O.K.?" By that I meant Dwayne. I was so mad by the time we'd come down off that tree, I'd left without a word.

"Yeah, Dwayne checked in. That's how we found out about the bridge. Want some breakfast?"

"No thanks."

"What are you going to do with yourself?"

"I guess I'll just go back and read or something," I said. "Unless you've got chores you want me to do."

"Not a thing today. Look, hon, I just can't stand the thought of you sitting alone in that shack. Why don't you come into town with us?"

"What about the bridge?" I said.

"We're going to drive up to where it's washed out. Dwayne's meeting us there on the other side."

I thought about it. Really, I did not want to go.

"They say the sun's coming out later today," Irene insisted. "Come on and

make an old girl happy."

"All right," I said.

The runoff from the storm had torn through the creekbed and eaten away the wood pilings under the bridge. The highway crew had thrown some temporary stringers across the ones that were left, and nailed on a deck. Gordy, Irene, and I walked over it carefully to the other side, where Dwayne waited in his truck.

"Take me to the river." Dwayne said. "How're you?"

"Just fine," Irene said cheerfully.

"Hop in. Room in the cab, room in the back."

"We'll ride outside," Gordy said.

I rode in the cab with Dwayne. He drove slowly, maneuvering around the fallen branches in the road.

"That was one hell of a story," Dwayne said. "I thought I'd get my *head* torn off on that tree."

"What'd you do it for?" I said.

"Money, man. Thirty-five hundred bucks!"

"Well, did you get it?"

"Not quite. That's where you come in. We're going to pay that little skeptic a visit."

I settled back into my seat. Dwayne had a way of making his plans sound inevitable.

He made a right turn off Range Line onto the Coast Road, a wide, modern highway that ran from the desert railhead at Orem out to Haven. There wasn't much traffic, and Dwayne opened it up.

"So. You know, you really disappointed a certain someone last night."

"I didn't feel like playing the girl game," I said.

"The *girl* game!" Dwayne looked over at me with a mixture of wonder and complete disgust.

We dropped over the pass. You could see Haven spread along the thin coastal plain, spotted with patches of sunlight, and you could make out some of the amusement rides spinning at the beach boardwalk. In the harbor, floating like a big, dull silver kettle, lay the *stella*. Then, as Dwayne roared down the grade the view flattened out so that you could see only the humps of the roller coaster straight ahead.

Right outside the city limits, a crew was working on a tent that had

collapsed in the storm. It was a big tent that could hold a couple of hundred people. Along the highway was a projection sign in electric blue announcing the Pennebaker Revival. "Hear the Message!" the sign read. "Feel the Wonder!" Then Reverend Jim Pennebaker suddenly materialized. With him was a girl in white, and a young man. They were forty feet high and looked out over Haven with a kindly, inspired gaze.

"That's Rob," I said. "And Audrey!"

"So?" Dwayne said.

"You tried to fix me up with Audrey *Pennebaker*?"

"What difference does it make?"

"You should have told me!"

"Then you would have been nice, huh?" Dwayne reached behind him and slid open the rear window.

"How about it, Irene? Is he big enough for you?"

"You shut up, Dwayne!"

"Ha!" Dwayne yelled. He turned off the highway suddenly, bouncing across the open field, and tore around the tent, churning up a rooster tail of mud. Then he headed straight for the Pennebaker sign.

"Look out, Jimmy boy!"

He slammed on the brakes, yanked the wheel around, and hit the gas. The truck spun backward twice around the sign, and then shot out onto the highway again, leaving the Pennebakers bumping up against each other.

"Look at 'em Reeny! They're in *loovve*!"

I looked back. Gordy was laughing so hard he had almost swallowed his pipe. Irene was white with indignation.

"Dwayne Nelson —," she sputtered.

"Feel the wonder!" Dwayne yelled as we roared off toward town.

WE DROPPED Gordy and Irene off downtown to shop, then stashed the truck in the carport under Dwayne's apartment. In Haven, rents were cheaper and the places more run-down the closer you came to the beach. I suppose it was the old custom of leaving the waterfront to the lowlifes. Anyway, it was a humid day, and it was starting to get warm.

"Let's take a little stroll to the harbor," he said.

"What's at the harbor?"

"My money, Dawg. Don't be dense."

The people who had laid out Haven must have been history buffs. The streets leading down to the water were all named after centuries. We started down Twentieth Century Street. At the corner of Nineteenth Century, there were kids playing in the mud. All the kids knew Dwayne. They threw rocks at us. We chased them, and they vanished through fence holes too small for us to get through.

"They really love you here," I said.

"Don't they?" Dwayne said contentedly. "That's cause I'm one of them. That was me out there throwing rocks not so long ago." He stopped and picked up a stone and fired it at me. I moved a little, and it whistled past my head.

"Man, you're lazy!"

"It missed me, didn't it?"

"I guess." We walked along.

"Why don't you ever come surfing with me, Dawg?"

"Maybe I don't like water," I said.

"It's not about water, man! It's a *feeling*."

"Feeling," I said.

"That's right. What's wrong with it?"

"Plenty, if it's all you care about."

"Like you know."

"I knew a few people who were only into feeling things," I said.

"What, back at the Tree? Who cares about that, man? The Tree's history."

"It's still no good," I insisted.

"Aurgghhh," Dwayne said.

We were down at the harbor now. There was a guarded gate at the foot of the pier, and the dull bulk of the *Stella* moored at the end of it. There was plenty of chop in the harbor from the tail end of the storm, but the *Stella* was so massive she didn't move. She was like an island out there.

Dwayne lead me past a bait shop, hopped into the narrow space between it and the next building, stepping sideways through water shadows that wavered against the old, dark clapboards. When he disappeared suddenly, I went out as far as I could, and there he was hanging above the water, pulling himself hand over hand till he reached the underside of the pier. I followed, and we pulled ourselves up top. We had got past the gate.

"Now what?"

"Now it's welcome aboard, matey."

The star cruiser was bigger than the biggest building in Haven.

We walked along. The pier was a long one. There were a few people fishing over the rail. As we came up, one of the fishermen hooked something, pulled hard, and whipped a flat orange fish down on the deck.

"Man, is that ugly!" Dwayne said. We kept walking. The *Stella* just got bigger and bigger. It was bigger than the Pennebaker Revival tent. It was bigger than the biggest building in Haven. I had never been this close to a star cruiser before, and I could not believe how big it was.

The *Stella*'s ramp was wide open. A sign over it said visitors had to sign in, and there was a nook in the bulkhead with a log sheet and a palm set. We signed, laid in our handprints, and came aboard. Nobody stopped us. Nobody even looked at us. We crossed a lounge that had a pair of sweeping, opposed staircases. I took one; Dwayne took the other. Then we got into an elevator.

"Deck eight," Dwayne said.

The car moved sideways and then up. The door opened. Now there was carpeting and soft violet indirect lighting. Dwayne knew where he was going. He stopped in front of a door and pressed a button, glancing back at me. Then he pressed it again.

"What?" came a sleepy voice inside.

"Purser."

"G'way. Sleeping."

"I'm afraid it can't wait, sir. A theft of some money has been reported. Your name has come up."

We heard stirring inside. "O.K.," Dwayne said softly. "Soon as he opens it, we rush him."

"Dwayne—"

"Are you here to help me or not?"

"Oh, hello!"

"Dwayne and I looked back. It was Audrey. The door opened. Rob saw it was Dwayne and tried to shut it, but Dwayne had his foot in.

"Get out of here!" Rob yelled.

"What's this all about?" Audrey said.

"Just paying your brother a little visit," Dwayne said through his teeth.

He was trying to keep the door from closing. "Come on, Dawg!" I smiled foolishly at Audrey, grabbed the door with him, and pulled. It snapped open, and we tumbled in. There was Rob with the phone in his hand. Dwayne took it away.

"Good morning, Rob," Dwayne said pleasantly. "We've come to have a little talk about that bet we made."

Rob sat down on his bed. "I was drunk," he said.

"True. So was I. But we still have a bet."

Audrey was watching from the corridor. "Robin? Is this true? You owe this boy some money?"

"It was stupid. All he did was climb a tree."

"During a lightning storm," Audrey said sternly. "You'd better pay him."

"Pay him? Are you nuts?"

"Pay, or I'll tell Daddy you were drinking again!"

Rob lay back resignedly against the pillows.

"There're travel drafts on the table," he said.

Dwayne got the wallet with the drafts. He had a pen in one of his trouser pockets and gave it to Rob.

"Daddy's Reverend Pennebaker, isn't he?" I said to Audrey.

"Yes," she said. Then, to her brother: "Sign them, Rob!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Rob said.

"Beauty," Dwayne said when he was through. He flapped the drafts to dry the ink on the signatures. "So long, *Robin*." We left him sitting on the bed and went out.

"Knowing my brother, I suggest you cash those right away," Audrey said.

"Sister, you just read my mind," Dwayne said. "Let's go, Dawg."

"And I'd better come with you. In case he thinks of calling the guards."

We left the pier and walked downtown to the American Express. While Dwayne waited in line, Audrey and I sat at the café across the street and ordered coffee.

"I'm awfully glad to see you again," Audrey said. "It gives me a chance to apologize for last night."

"You don't have to apologize."

"Oh yes, I do. I should have called Rob off. He's awful sometimes, but he listens to me."

"Why didn't you, then?"

She smiled and looked out at the street.

"I suppose I was a little mad at you."

"Why?"

"Well, usually when I. . . . Oh, this sounds so conceited."

"What?"

"Well, when I want someone to pay attention to me, they do."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I drank my coffee.

"Can I ask you something, G.D.?"

"Sure."

"Why'd you leave the party? It wasn't because of me, was it?"

"I just wanted to do some thinking," I said.

"Do you always go up to that place to think?"

"No, but. . . ." I smiled. "It's a little hard to explain."

"You don't have to."

"No. It's O.K. There was a friend of mine who died about a year ago. I guess I kind of put him out of my mind, but yesterday, for the first time, I *felt* him. Up at the Spot, during that tour. It's the reason I crashed, I guess."

Audrey smiled. "I thought I was the reason."

"You were. I mean . . . I told you, it's hard to explain. Anyway, I felt like my friend wanted me to do something for him. So I tried to get him to talk to me, I guess."

"Like praying," she said.

"I wouldn't know. I've never prayed before."

"Oh, but you should! When you pray, you *can* talk to someone. Someone real."

"My friend is real," I said stiffly.

She blushed. "I didn't mean. . . ."

"Forget it," I said.

"Maybe you could come to the Revival tonight. You and Dwayne."

"I don't know about Dwayne. He seems to think your dad is some kind of crook."

"Really," she said in a cold voice.

"Now it's my turn to say the wrong thing," I said. After a moment, Audrey smiled.

"Oh, it's all right. Lots of people who don't know Daddy think that. But would you come? I only want you to see there is someone you can talk to.

Would you come as my guest?"

"O.K.," I said. "Why not?"

"Good. Look, I'd better go. I've got rehearsal. But come to the grounds around eight. Just give your name at the door, and they'll take you in. O.K.?"

"O.K."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Good," she said happily, and left me.

I watched her walk off. Then she turned the corner, and I realized I was feeling strange again. I was just like a room that you did not know was empty until someone turned the lights on. That's just what Audrey had done. Turned the lights on inside me.

I sat there drinking my coffee. In a little while, Dwayne came over holding a thick envelope.

"Got it! Thirty-five large!" Then: "Hey. Where's Audrey?"

"She had to go rehearse."

"You didn't chase her off again, did you?"

"No. This time she really did have to go."

"O.K. Let's find the folks. Today I'm buying lunch!"

WE ATE at this place that had a terrace with a view of the whole town. I had fried chicken and salad, and we looked at stuff Irene had bought, a whole set of miniature farm animals.

"What the hell is this?" Dwayne said, holding up a spotted, four-legged animal with horns.

"It's a cow, hon, and don't curse."

"What's it for?"

"Milk. Cream. Cheese. Hamburger."

"How's the milk come out?"

"You pull those levers on the head," Gordy said.

"Gord," Dwayne said. "You're lying to me."

"Say," Gordy said, pointing toward the hills with the stem of his pipe. "What do you suppose that is?"

Up against the blue sky, you could see what looked like a wisp of black smoke twisting and turning itself around. The cloud paused along

the top of the ridge, and then abruptly spread into a mist of specks that flew in and settled on the grounds surrounding the Pennebaker tent.

"Fliers," I said.

"Fliers? What the hell are they doing here? They never come to Haven!"

"Here for Revival, Dwayne," Irene said.

"What?"

"I heard some of 'em believe in Jesus. I'll bet they've brought their sick to be cured. That's what Jim Pennebaker's famous for. That power to heal the sick."

"They've got no right to come here," Dwayne said. "This is *our* town!"

Irene touched my arm. "Hon," she said in a worried voice. "I think we better get you home."

"Why should he go home? We're going to look at bikes, aren't we, Dawg?"

"Look here, Dwayne, if one of them bugs sees G.D., they'll take him back to that Rock. By their law, he's condemned. And what one of them knows, they all know. So you go get that truck and meet us back here right away. Got it?"

Irene had a way of talking when she was serious that had Dwayne saying, yes, ma'am. He fetched the truck, and we drove back up the grade. Passing the Revival grounds, we saw a couple hundred fliers waiting, crouched down with their wings folded over like crows in a muddy field.

I felt a pang seeing them there. They and their city had once been my whole life. I had been educated to respect and serve them. Maybe Dwayne hated them, and Irene was afraid of them, but I *liked* them. I liked how they looked, how they sounded when they spoke, the way they flew. I was one of them, in a way, because of Henry.

And like any one of them, being separated from the rest was almost more than I could stand.

Back at the Spot, everything was quiet. The draw lay deep in shadow, dark green with a strip of brilliant blue sky above. I spent the rest of the afternoon helping Gordy clear and cut up fallen branches. Then I went back to my cabin. I got cleaned up, sneaked past Irene and Gordy's, and hiked the four miles to the washed-out bridge. On Range Line I hitched a ride with a transport, and reached the Revival grounds a little before eight. There I fell in with a long line of people, got to a pair of well-scrubbed kids

in blue blazers who were taking tickets, and gave my name.

"Miss Pennebaker said she'd have a pass for me," I said. One of them went off and came back with an usher who gave me a program and showed me into the tent. There were bleachers on three sides and seats on the floor with a wide aisle up the middle leading to the stage. Onstage was a grand piano, risers for the choir, and a band setup. Broad silk panels in rainbow colors hung from the roof for a backdrop. The usher opened the door to some box seats on the side of the stage opposite the choir, and I took a seat.

Fliers were everywhere. They hung like bats from the cables that supported the top of the tent. There were more of them standing along the top row of the bleachers. Peppy, old-time music played through the speakers. Meanwhile, our people fidgeted and looked around. The light was yellow, and it smelled like popcorn and wet canvas and sawdust, and you felt the exciting atmosphere. I was fascinated. I had never been to any kind of religious service before. I wondered what the fliers hanging up in the wires thought about it all, too.

Finally they packed the place full, and all the lights came down except for the ones shining on the silk panels. The recorded music stopped. Off to the side, somebody shook a tambourine. Then a girl in a dazzling white robe came in and sat down at the piano. She looked right at me and smiled. It was Audrey.

The rest of the band came in. Rob was with them and strapped on a bass guitar. He looked at me, too, but he did not smile. Audrey nodded at him. Then she commenced pounding the piano; the spotlights opened wider, and the choir marched in and started singing, the drums and the bass guitar shaking the place so that it just about took your head off to hear it. Audrey leaned back, and, in the spotlights crisscrossing the roof, you could see the fliers rustling, and you felt their emotion fill the place up until it all started to take your breath away. I mean, I just sat there with my mouth open. I had never seen anything like it!

Suddenly the music stopped. Someone announced, "Brothers and Sisters, Reverend Jim Pennebaker!", and the reverend bounded up the stairs and took the pulpit.

Jim Pennebaker had the finest head of hair I had ever seen. He looked back at Audrey and Rob, gave them a little wink. Then he commenced to speak.

Oh, he was a rabble-rouser, all right. He shouted about sin, how you could never run away from it no matter how far you traveled, because the galaxies were like grains of rice between the Fingers of the Lord. He ranted and roared until it made you dizzy!

Pretty soon people began fainting in the aisles, but the Pennebaker organization was ready for that: ushers in sky-blue blazers and sneakers rushed out to drag off the overcome. Meanwhile, they kept at you with the talking and the music and the singing for a good hour and a half. Finally Jim Pennebaker's voice softened, and the lights came down low.

"Brothers and Sisters, we have new friends here among us this evening."

"Praise Jesus!" people cried.

"Friends who, though they may not look like us, are one with us in their hearts."

"Amen!"

"They are troubled, and they want peace! They are weary, and want to lay their burden down! They suffer *infirmity*, and long to be made whole again!"

"Yeah! Praise Him! Praise His name!"

"You must help them, my Brothers. Yeah, Sisters, you must take their hands and lead them along the shining path to the Kingdom of God! God doesn't care where you come from. He doesn't care what you look like, or what you've done! He only wants you to love Him. He wants to forgive your sins and wash you clean in the sweet water of His love! So help them forward, Brothers and Sisters! Show them that the golden path to His Kingdom starts anywhere you take that first step!"

His wristwatch sparkled in the spotlights. Then, suddenly, came the flutter of wings, and *they* began to drop down, gliding over the heads of the people sitting in the seats. They landed and filled the aisles. And in the front were the fliers with withered legs, broken wings; some who looked weak and off-color, and had to be helped by companions or ushers.

One of them was blind. His eyes were milky disks; the feathers atop the great head were twisted and sickly, just like Henry's. He even cocked his head the same way Henry used to.

God, I wanted to go down there and help him. That was what I'd been trained to do: to be a guide, to practice my profession, to fly and do the one thing I was truly good at in this world. What I missed more than anything,

more than I missed Henry, even. It was so damn unfair!

I was feeling good and sorry for myself, all right. Then I noticed something. On the other side of the stage, Rob was leaning back toward one of the cloth panels. He was talking to someone. The panel fluttered a little; there in the shadows was a flier I recognized by the gold medallion he wore. It was the consul general of the flier legation at Haven! Rob pointed at me. The consul moved back into the shadows. Then, as he passed along the cloth panels, I could see him headed my way. Maybe it was nothing. But maybe it was a good time to leave, anyway. I slipped out of the box, went down the side aisle where some of the fliers waited to be healed. The blind one was there. And just as I passed him, he stumbled.

I couldn't help myself. I did what I had been trained to do and caught his arm and kept him from falling. I guess I expected a rush of warm gratitude from him. Instead, there was only cold recognition: *You!*, and a buzz from the others in the tent.

Instantly, all of the atmosphere of the Revival evaporated. The harsh lights showed the sagging, patched canvas of the tent, and the sweaty, uncertain faces of the people on the floor and in the splintered bleachers. Jim Pennebaker did not know what had gone wrong. "Brothers . . . and Sisters, please . . .," he stammered.

The blind one took his hand away and stepped back, as if he were afraid I might hurt him. And it all just hung that way for a second, frozen, like a painting. Then all hell broke loose. The fliers began to buzz excitedly, clumping together, dancing and rubbing their wings. The noise picked up, and the feeling they generated of an angry swarm spread out over the people in the tent. Most of them had not been around fliers much, and didn't realize fliers could generate such powerful emotions. You could feel it build. There was an instant before the scene blew apart, and I used it, and ran outside across the muddy field to the highway. There I stood in the road, waving my arms at a transport that rushed up at me out of the dark.

"What the hell are you doing!" the driver yelled when he stopped.

"Mister, you've got to give me a lift!"

"How do I know you ain't killed somebody?"

"You don't. Please, mister, just over the hill to Range Line. Please!"

The driver looked me over, decided somehow that I was both trustworthy and truly desperate, and popped the passenger-side door. I got in

just as the Pennebaker tent burst like a paper bag, and they all flew out in a swarm, looking for me.

The truck took me as far as the washed-out bridge. On the other side was Gordy and Irene's car. I knew where they kept a spare key in a little magnetic box stuck underneath the fender, found it, and drove out to the Spot.

I got to the shed just ahead of them. You could hear them buzzing up in the clouds. I looked out of one of the crazily angled windows, but I couldn't see anything. Judging from the sound, though, more had come in besides the ones who were at the Revival. Well, I thought. Now we are going to see if it's true about the Mystery Spot. Maybe they won't come down here and get me. Even if they didn't, it was still a hell of a mess.

All night long the buzzing got louder. I lay on the floor and tried to sleep, but all I could think about was going back to the Rock. Then, after a while, Irene came up.

"G.D.!" she cried, and came in and put her arms around me and squeezed so hard I coughed. "We've been everywhere looking for you! Are you all right?"

"Sure," I said.

"They haven't tried to get in?"

"Not yet," I said.

"I just came back from the consulate," Irene said. "I had to put on one of those harnesses like you used to wear, so I could talk to that consul general. Gordy couldn't do it, you know, because of his pacemaker. But that thing was so.... Well, he treated me like a criminal, that's all! Said I'd be prosecuted, too. I told him I didn't care, that you were a good, decent boy. He just started in about how great collective wisdom was, and I was just a stand-alone and couldn't possibly comprehend even a sliver of it! I said I comprehended he was a jackass!"

I laughed. "Good for you, Irene."

"But G.D., he wanted me to turn you in. And he did something to me ... got me to where I almost said I would. Oh, what did you show yourself like that for?"

"Believe me, it wasn't my idea," I said.

I know. How are you, though? You O.K.? Want something to eat?"

"No, but — would you do me a favor?"

"Anything, hon."

"Henry's picture. Would you bring it up here, Irene?"

"What, those chicken scratches?"

"Please, Irene. I have to know what to do. And Henry was really smart. Maybe having something of his around will help me figure things out. Please."

"All right, hon," she said in a worried voice, and left.

The buzzing in the clouds got louder and louder. Irene came back through the twisted doorway, picture in one hand and a paper sack in the other.

"Brought you something anyway," she said.

"Thanks, Irene." I could tell she wanted to stay and keep me company, but I wanted to be alone. Gently, I told her so. She said she would check up on me in a couple of hours.

I stuck Henry's painting halfway up the wall. Then I sat down on the red spot painted on the floor, and looked at the picture. In all my time at Gordy and Irene's I had never really looked at it. I thought it would hurt too much. Irene was right, though. It *was* chicken scratches, red and black ones on a gray background. I thought, How in the world could Henry have ever spent six weeks on *this*? I touched the paint. It didn't feel built-up or thick. The canvas had been painted once, and that was it.

The chicken scratches were generally pointed in toward the middle of the canvas, and the gray there was a slight shade off. There might have been some red in it. It was a composition, but not one you could make any sense of.

Then I thought, most of Henry's stuff didn't make sense in a logical way. What it did was make you *feel* something that made sense. I didn't feel anything looking at this! But then, I had never looked at anything of Henry's as though it were a puzzle before.

The Well of Loneliness. That's what he'd called it. But when did you ever look into a well from the side? I got up, took the painting off the wall, and laid it on the floor. Then I jumped up, caught a beam, and swung myself up so I was straddling the rafter right over the painting.

The painting *changed.* It wasn't a flat surface anymore. Instead, it was the edge of something deep and endless that pulled on the chicken scratches like forks on a sliding tablecloth. The perspective changed so

drastically that I lost my balance and fell.

I landed on all fours, still looking. *Things were moving in there!* Flecks of color spiraled down deep, and it seemed like you could follow them, too. All you had to do was let yourself go.

I swear, at that moment I felt Henry's presence. I was certain he was a prisoner inside that Well of Loneliness. Maybe that's why they stayed away from here, I thought. Maybe the Spot was a doorway to purgatory for them, one that never let go once you were caught in it. Oh, I wanted to try and save him! All I had to do was let it take me. . . .

But I caught myself. I couldn't help Henry that way. All I would be doing was giving up, and I knew he'd never want that. I mean, what was the point of escaping if I didn't intend to go on with my life? But I'd been too busy hiding from the past. And if you lived like that — well, if that wasn't a Well of Loneliness, what was?

I STUCK HENRY'S picture to the wall and lay down and closed my eyes. I was exhausted, and I fell asleep right away.

When I woke up, the sound of them buzzing over the Spot was as loud as I had ever heard it in the Tree. I stuck my head out the window and had a look. The clouds were breaking up. There were thousands of fliers in a slow spiral over the shed. They were stacked up —the closest a couple of hundred feet above the trees; the farthest, up so high you could make them out only as specks against the blue sky — into a deep, flying cylinder. Looking up through it was like being inside Henry's picture looking out.

I sat down again and ate the sandwich Irene had made for me. Then I heard Dwayne's truck screaming through the woods. They must have finished repairing the bridge. The door slammed, and I heard him come up the path.

"Son of a bitch!" he said, coming into the shed. "What's going on?"

"They found out I was here," I said.

"Ha!" Dwayne hooted. "Irene must be having a brick!"

I sighed. I'd forgotten about that. Irene had to be terrified. Dwayne leaned back out the door and waved his arms.

"Up yours, you bastards!"

"Don't do that, Dwayne—"

"Do what?" he said sharply. "Man, they got you brainwashed."

"I can't help how I feel."

"Oh yeah, you can." He took an envelope from his trouser pocket and tossed it to me.

"What's this?"

"A ticket out of here. The *Stella*'s leaving this morning in about. . . ." He looked at his watch. . . . "Forty minutes."

"Where'd you get this?"

"Bought it."

"Not with your bike money."

"Hey, I hate those bastards. I'll save more dough. Always plenty of suckers rolling into town."

"Dwayne, I don't know. This is my home."

"Correction, Dawg. It's *their* home. And they're gonna circle up there till somebody cracks. I can feel them up there. It's making my skin crawl! They'll drive Haven nuts. Sooner or later you'll come out!"

"O.K.," I said. "But even if I wanted to leave, I don't know how I can. They're locked onto me."

"Yeah," Dwayne grinned. "Ought to be interesting."

Dwayne sent Gordy and Irene up to see me while he started the truck. Irene's eyes were red. She wanted to pack some of my things, but I said, no; it was better to travel light.

"You want to take one thing with you, though," Gordy said. And he pulled out his pocketknife and cut Henry's painting right out of the frame.

"Gordy, no —"

"Already done," he said, rolling it up. I unbuttoned my coveralls and put the picture inside. Gordy put his arm around Irene. "You write us when you get off on the *Stella*."

I shook hands with him and kissed her. Then I went out the back of the shed. The brush was thick there, and I slipped down the hillside to the back porch of the cabin. Dwayne was parked in the front. I waved at him; he opened the passenger-side door. I ran outside and dove in, and he hit it, and we tore through the draw toward Range Line.

"Think they saw me?"

"You tell me!" Dwayne said. He popped the sunroof, but all you could see were blurry patches of blue between the tree branches. Dwayne punched the music on. I reached over and turned it off.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"I gotta think, Dwayne. I gotta be ready."

"Loosen up, Dawg! I'm driving you right to the lounge of the *Stella*!"

But they did know I was gone. When Dwayne tore over the rebuilt part of the bridge, I looked up and saw the swarm spreading out across the sky. They could fly fast, but not as fast as the truck. The trouble was that we were headed south, and had to turn east to get back to Haven and the coast. As I watched, the swarm split, the bigger part headed for Haven.

"Man, they've got more brains than I thought."

"One brain," I said. "They're one thing when it comes to something like this."

We reached the coast highway. Dwayne floored it, weaving through the traffic. The sky looked clear now. Then we came over the summit. Dwayne stood on the brakes, and we squealed to a stop.

"*Look* at them all!" he said.

There were thousands of them. A fine mist of them in the sky coming in from the west, others settled in on the town. They perched on every rooftop, every tree, every pole. They covered the lots and stood in the streets. There were so many of them it looked as though a pale green snow covered the town. Dwayne turned a little green now, too, seeing them all.

"Look," I said. "They didn't know about me till last night, right? And they probably flew in from the Tree. It's the closest big city. The rest were circling the Spot all night long."

"So?"

"They've got to be tired. Look at them. They're not moving around much. They're not flying anymore. They're resting."

"They do that?"

"Yeah, Dwayne, they do just about everything we do. They even ask dumb questions."

"O.K., O.K. So what do we do?"

"Drive right through them. Nice and easy, no noise. Nothing to get them excited."

"O.K.," he said. He put the truck into gear. He drove on the shoulder to get by the stopped transports and cars, and we wound down the grade.

At first, there were only a few of them standing near the road. Then we reached the Revival grounds. All that was left were stacked sections of the rented bleachers and the torn remains of the tent. There were more fliers

on the road. One, standing on the centerline, looked right in at us, panning with his eyes as we passed.

"Man," said Dwayne. "We're in the middle of all their communications traffic. That's all you're feeling. You'll be all right."

There were bunches of them standing around now. Some munched wads of leaves. It wasn't as though there were any plan to block our way. They had simply landed and stayed put. Dwayne drove slowly through them. They moved aside when they felt the bumper of his truck, fluttering their wings. Once, one of them took off, and a general buzzing started, but quickly died. But after a couple of minutes, we had barely traveled a quarter mile. Dwayne looked at his watch.

"You're going to miss that ship, Dawg." he said grimly. "We got to do something." Before I could say anything, he leaned on the horn. This spooked the ones right in front of us, and they lifted off.

"Yeah!" Dwayne yelled, and shot forward, and hit the horn again. More of them rose up. So did the hair on the back on my neck.

"Dwayne, take it easy," I said.

That's when the first one hit the truck. We rocked violently to the left; glass broke; Dwayne swore and leaned on the horn. More of them hit us. Then the windshield exploded in a shower of glass pebbles, and I felt something pull at my neck and shoulders, and they yanked me out through the sunroof.

The one who had me closed his middle legs around my waist and lifted off. I heard Dwayne yell, and looked over, and there we were, flying side by side. Dwayne was kicking hard, trying to get loose. I didn't. I was flying again!

I let myself enjoy it for a moment. But it was different. This wasn't Henry. The one who had me now could see. And I wasn't guiding him, either. We were gaining altitude slowly, swinging out toward the water to get a good run at the mountains. It wasn't easy for this one to carry me, and I could see Dwayne's flier laboring, too. I called over to him.

"Dwayne! Dwayne, listen to me! Relax!"

"*Relax!*" he yelled back.

"I want you to twist toward me when I tell you to! Put your shoulder into it and twist!"

"What for?"

"Just do it when I say!"

We were starting to swing west. Below was the boardwalk, and the harbor, with the *Stella* gleaming under the strong morning sun. The one who had Dwayne drifted toward me a little. . . .

"*Now*! Twist!"

I jerked my shouder toward Dwayne and kept the pressure up, and felt the flier adjusting his grip, trying to hold on. But to fly straight, he had to have balance, and he wasn't used to carrying a load. He veered close to the other one, and I grabbed Dwayne's arm. They tried to pull us apart. Dwayne's eyes met mine. I knew he was scared.

"*Pull*, Dwayne! Get rid of him!" And Dwayne yelled and gave a huge yank. The one who had him let him go. I was the one holding him now. My flier beat his wings furiously, trying to continue his climb, but he faltered. We leveled, then began to lose altitude.

"Oh man," Dwayne said. "I'm gonna drop—"

"Grab my belt!"

"I can't—"

We were still a couple of hundred feet up. Right over the amusement rides. Dwayne swung his arm, reached for my belt, and missed.

"Dwayne, man! You want them to win? You want them to *beat* you?"

"*No*!" He yelled. I felt his fingertips catch hold of my belt, and tighten.

"You on?"

"Yeah."

"Now let's steer him down to the *Stella*."

"How?"

"Spread your feet. Turn your legs the way you want him to go."

Dwayne did it. The flier began to turn, and Dwayne laughed.

"He's *hating* it!"

"They all are. Look at them!"

They were circling us and buzzing like mad now, but you could tell they were uncertain about what to do. They swooped under Dwayne's legs, but they couldn't knock him loose. They couldn't grab him, either. Their legs were attached below the wing, and they couldn't really fly upside down. We kept dropping. We were almost to the pier now, maybe thirty feet up.

"Dwayne! I yelled. "Get ready. We're gonna let go."

"O.K."

Twenty feet now. We were behind the line of shops along the

waterfront. The tide was out. There was a strip of sand between the water and the pilings.

"*Now*!" I yelled, and wrenched free.

We dropped, hit the sand hard, and tumbled. I rolled up and got my bearings. Dwayne was up, too, and we sprinted under the pier. It was cold and dark down there. You could hear them buzzing up above. We swam deep underneath, climbed a piling, and caught our breath.

"You O.K.?"

"Yeah. Man. Dawg. You used to do that? Fly like that?"

"Sure."

"Man, I take back everything I ever said about you."

"Get out of here, Dwayne. Lay low for a while."

"You lay low for a while."

He slipped back into the water and swam north. There were plenty of caves in the sandstone cliff above the breakwater, where Dwayne had lived before when he was in trouble or couldn't make rent. I told myself he'd be all right, and started working my way to the end of the pier.

As I got closer, the buzzing overhead was replaced by the deep pulse coming from the *Stella*'s hull. The water underneath the pier looked flat, and the surface jiggled as though someone had stuck a giant tuning fork into it. I swung over to the top and had a look. Fliers swarmed above the boardwalk, but the *Stella*'s ramp was open, and I ran aboard. A purser and two security guards stopped me immediately.

"How did you get in here?" the purser demanded.

"I got a ticket." I showed it. The purser took a scanner from his belt and ran the ticket through. As soon as the scanner beeped, his manner changed completely.

"Ah. Mr. Hound," he said.

"Mr. *Hound*?"

"You are Mr. Hound, aren't you?"

"Oh yeah," I said.

"We were afraid you'd missed us."

"I was detained," I said.

"Of course," he said. "Have you any baggage?"

"On a pleasure cruise?"

The purser smiled knowingly. One less thing to take care of. "Step into the scale booth, then, Mr. Hound. We'll be under way as soon as we

calibrate your mass."

I went in. A pale violet light flashed on and off.

"Very good, sir. I'll have the porter show you to your cabin."

I stepped out and froze. Down the staircase came Jim Pennebaker and a flier. It was the consul general. I tried to duck back into the booth, but the consul general had picked me up. Jim Pennebaker was wearing a translator tucked against the small of his back. The consul general's jaws clacked. He was way bigger than Henry, and he wasn't old. He could have cut through my neck like pruning shears through a twig. Jim Pennebaker nodded and came over to see me.

"You're the young man who caused the almighty commotion last night."

"Naw," I said.

"He says he wants you to go with him."

"Tell him I'd like to talk first."

Jim Pennebaker frowned. "I'm trying to establish a permanent mission here, son. I've almost got them to agree —"

"Please tell him," I said.

"He would like to talk first," the reverend said. After a moment the consul general buzzed something back. Jim Pennebaker nodded.

"He says that you can make a statement after you agree to surrender."

"Statement?" I said.

"That's what he says."

"All right. Give me the belt."

Reverend Pennebaker took the belt off. I fit it, powered it up, and felt the warm needles press against my back. The consul general looked at me coldly.

"You were wise to give yourself up," he said. His voice came as a tingling in my back that turned into words inside my head. "You've caused too much trouble. Now the matter will be closed."

"Look at me, sir," I said.

"I am looking at you."

"I mean *really* look. You know I didn't kill him."

"It is pointless to discuss it. You have been tried and convicted."

"If Henry had died in his bed," I said, "what would have happened to me?"

"Nothing, of course."

"But in bed he would have died miserably. Instead, he died happy! Happy because he was free. You know that's true! All of you felt that before he let me go and flew into that mountain."

The consul general did not speak. I said softly, "Did you really think he'd live forever?"

"Perhaps we did," the consul general said after a moment. "But it changes nothing."

"Let me go," I said.

"Impossible."

"Look," I said. "I have something he did that I don't understand. It's a painting we call *The Well of Loneliness*. He painted it at the place in the hills where your people won't go. Set me free, and I'll give it to you."

"Impossible," the consul general repeated. "You will come with me now."

I unbuttoned my coveralls. The picture had been flattened against my stomach. I unfolded it, hoping the paint wouldn't crack, and held it out for the consul general to see.

It is hard to describe exactly what happened next. All I know is that I felt a wave of emotion coming out of the consul general like nothing I'd ever felt before, even with Henry. I blacked out. I don't know for how long. Then things got clearer, and I saw the purser standing next to Jim Pennebaker, trying to steady him.

"My God," the reverend whispered.

Finally the consul general moved. He took the painting from my hands, rolled it up, and left the *Stella* without another word.

Five minutes later we were under way. I lay on my bunk, feeling like my heart had been yanked right out of my chest. I thought, who knew what was outside the wall of this ship? You couldn't stand on deck and watch the world get small and then drop over the horizon, like they did in those old sea books. But it was like that. This time I was truly alone, and for good.

A soft bong came from the door. I sat up.

"G.D.?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you all right?"

"I think so. But I have no idea how to open the door."

"You have to tell it," she said. I did, and the lights came on, and there was Audrey standing out in the hall.

"Hello," she said shyly.

"Hi."

"Daddy said you were on board."

"Oh."

"You look awfully sad, G.D. May I come in?"

"Sure."

"Leave it open," she said to the door. There was a writing table built into the wall with a chair underneath. Audrey pulled the chair out and sat down.

"Daddy told me what happened."

"Does he know? Because I'm really not too sure myself."

"He said you gave up something truly wonderful."

There wasn't much I could add to that.

"G.D., I want you to know something. They can't take everything away from you."

"They've done pretty well so far," I said.

"Remember what I told you before? There's someone you can talk to."

"I don't believe in it, Audrey," I said.

"Why can't you? You believe in so many other things."

I looked into her warm brown eyes and thought, well, that was true. So I said maybe I would try. She took my hand, and we got down on our knees together.

The first thing I asked for was if maybe, sometimes, I could talk to Henry, too.



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Coming Attractions

MY THOUGHTS turn to the future as we move into a new year, and as a result, we'll have a lot of thoughtful forward-looking fiction in our February issue. Novelist **Victor Koman** *(Solomon's Knife, The Jehovah Contract)* makes his first appearance in F&SF with a harsh look at the space program. "Bootstrap Enterprise" begins with the question "What would you give to go into space?" and ends with a rather frightening answer.

Our cover story, "The Swan" by **Robert Onopa**, is a strange science fiction story about a Southern California Harbor Inspector named Voorst investigating a rash of harbor fires in the Los Angeles area. He finds himself fighting against the Army, and stringers for the Virtual News Network (VNN), and in the midst of it all, discovers a mysterious antique sailboat named the Swan.

Just because the issue is thoughtful, however, doesn't mean that it is all serious. **Jack C. Haldeman** returns to these pages after too long an absence with a wonderfully funny, touching — and thought-provoking —look at loneliness in "Lonesome Homesick Blues."

The issue isn't all science fiction, of course. It'll have our usual blend of fantasy and horror as well. Don't miss this one.

And in future issues, **Nancy Springer** will return with one of the strongest novellas we've ever published. **Tanith Lee** offers a science fiction story that reads like fantasy, and **Kevin J. Anderson** will provide a nanotechnology story of the near-future. Also watch for stories by **Kit Reed, Steve Perry, Ray Aldridge** and **John Brunner.**

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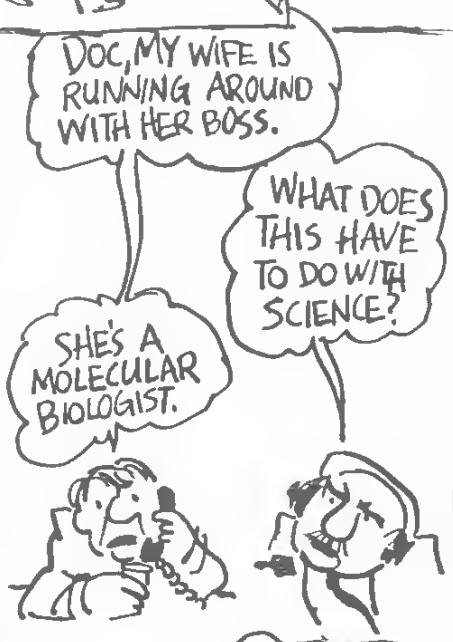
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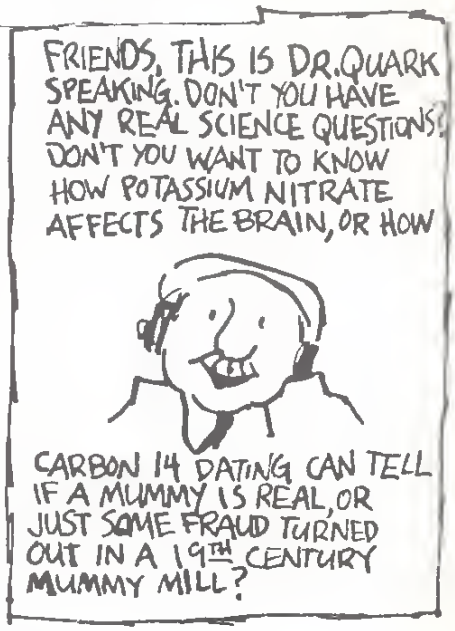
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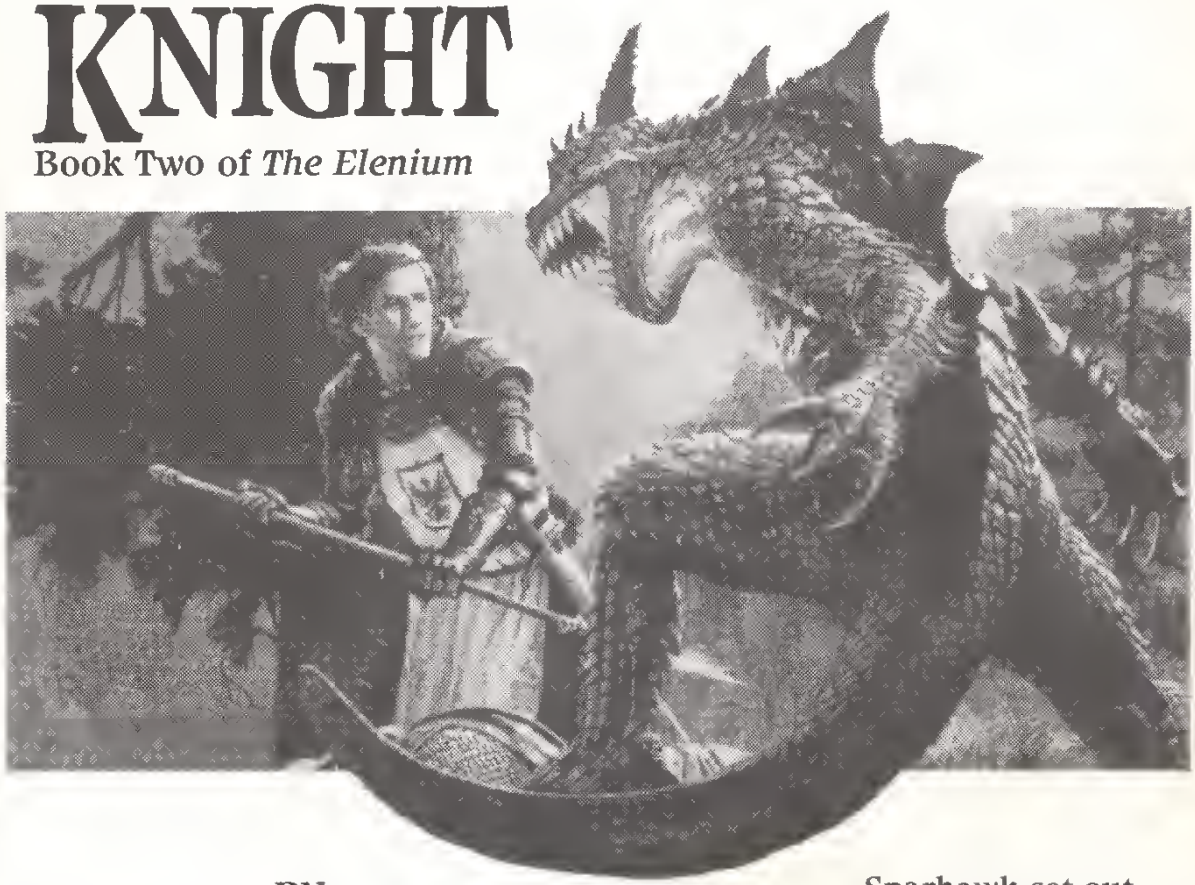


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